Married in Haste

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[Maxwell, Mrs. Mary Elizabeth (Braddon)]

By

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CHAPTER I.

THE Christmas-eve that brought happiness to so many thousands of homes brought to me nothing more than a long uncomfortable journey and the novelty of a first situation; for I had traveled from London to the lake country; and, when I reached the station at Ulladale, my senses were numbed with cold and frost.

Evidently some mistake had been made as to the time of the trains, for the carriage which I had expected would be sent to meet me had not yet arrived. The station was a small one, and there were few people about. The wind wailed dismally round the building. The open archway that led from the station to the road looked like a black yawning abyss. Anything was better than remaining there, so I resolved to fill up the time that I must wait in walking down the road that led to Ulladale. In the distance was the pretty town, the church-spires of which stood out tall and white. Just as I reached the end of the road, the moon came from behind the clouds and cast a silvery gleam over the snow-clad scene, and then it was exceedingly beautiful.

I leaned over the stile to gaze at it. The moonlight kissed the white spires, the snow-covered meadows, the distant houses. From the bare hedges and the branches of the trees hung great icicles which glittered like diamonds. The red berries shone on the holly trees, the tall dark firs stood out in martial array, the stars shone in the night-sky.

Oh, beautiful Christmas-eve! Something stirred in my heart and brought tears to my eyes when the bells began to ring and the soft sweet chime came to me across the snow.

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I thought of the happy homes that Christmas moon was shining on, of devoted husbands and wives, fond fathers and mothers, merry children home from school, of happy lovers, kindly friends. I looked up to the sky, and I prayed that Heaven would send some one to love me. Every one expects a gift at Christmas-time, and that was what I asked from Heaven. That was my prayer on Christmas-eve, and my story will tell how it was granted.

I returned to the station just as the hour was striking, and found that the carriage had arrived during my absence. The coachman touched his hat as I came up the platform. There was no other being in sight.

"The carriage for Miss Forster, from Ullamere," he said. And a few minutes later I was on my way to the Hall.

It seemed as though the stars were lighting me to a fresh life, as though the snow-fringed branches of the tall trees were beckoning to me. I felt a weird sensation in driving alone through this silent country on Christmas-eve.

The moon shone out with a whiter, brighter light. I saw that we were driving through a beautiful park. The water lying under the trees was completely frozen; the evergreens stood out distinct and clear; and the weird music of the wind, as it stirred the great trees, sounded as though the very spirit of Christmas were abroad.

A sudden curve, the ripple of a fountain not yet frozen, the cry of a startled bird, the deep baying of a hound, and we were driving up a fine avenue of chestnut-trees. The moon revealed a noble pile of buildings. I see the picture now as I saw it then. Ullamere was a large, handsome residence, built in the Italian style, with pillared porch and balcony, and stately wings. A lawn sloped down to the very edge of the lake, and the park lay behind the house. No ruddy light shone from the windows; all was dark and gloomy. It struck me vaguely, as I stood outside, that the house held a secret. No answer came to the first ring; the second brought an old gray-haired man, who opened the door cautiously, it seemed to me. In the large entrance-hall there were no evergreens, no firelight, no mistletoe-bough, only gloom and deep shadows. A small lamp glimmered somewhere in the depths of the hall. I felt chilled.

"Miss Forster," said the butler, "my lady is expecting you. Will you step this way?"

He led the way to the library, where a fire burned in the grate and a lighted lamp stood on the table. As for any sign of Christmas, I might as well have looked for roses in December.

"I will tell Lady Culmore that you are here, he said.

He went away, leaving me alone. What a silent house this was! No sound disturbed it, not even the opening or shutting of a door; and the silence appeared to grow more and more intense. It seemed as though an atmosphere of wrong-doing filled the house. I turned up the lamp. The light fell on handsome marble busts, on well-lined bookcases, on massive bronze ornaments, on a few choice pictures.

Presently the door opened, and the gray-haired butler announced "Lady Culmore." I heard the rustle of a silken dress; a faint odor, as of heliotrope, was wafted to me. As I saw her then I shall see her until I die. She came in with a quiet, graceful movement. Her dress was of rich ruby velvet, while fine lace shrouded the white shoulders and the rounded arms. She was beautiful as a queen; and, if ever a woman's face told a story, her face did. I read in it power, passion, terrible repression—the outcome of an unnatural life; I read wistfulness and fear. It was the loveliest, but the strangest face I had ever seen. One peculiarity of it was that, when she was not speaking or smiling, her lips became very pale.

She came to me with outstretched hands, but without a smile, without a gleam of welcome in her eyes. She was like a fair marble statue, yet what a depth of feeling lay in the dark blue eyes!

"You have had a long, cold journey, Miss Forster," she said. "It is eight o'clock, and we are just going to take tea. Mrs. Harper shall show you to your room, and then you can join us."

Not to save my life could I have refrained, as I raised my eyes, filled with tears, to her face, from saying—

"This is not much like Christmas."

And, if the words had been so many barbed arrows that pierced her heart, she could not have started more. It was as though some long-lost voice had spoken to her.

"Is it Christmas-eve?" she replied. "I had forgotten it."

"You forgot that it was Christmas-eve!" I cried, wonder-

ing to myself what manner of woman this was. "Why," I continued, "the whole world remembers and loves Christmas!"

"I loved it once," she remarked.

"And why not now?" I asked, without thinking that perhaps my words were abrupt.

"Now?" she answered dully. "Oh, now is quite different!" She looked confused, as though she hardly knew how to answer me. Then, seeing the tears rain down my face, she added, "You must try to be happy. It was kind of you to come. You will find Ullamere a beautiful place, but very dull."

She shuddered as she spoke: and I noticed that her voice was sweet and clear, but sadly deficient in the sweet intonations that speak of hope and love. I believe that I was almost frightened by her.

"You are fatigued with your long journey," she said, seeing that my tears still fell.

"Yes; but it is not that," I replied. "I thought Christmas was so beautiful in England."

"So it is," she replied; and she clasped her white hands together. "But not here—not here; we forget it. It must seem strange to you."

I had read such beautiful stories of Christmas-eve in England—of the holly and mistletoe, and of Christmas decorations. I remembered my prayer at the stile under the snow-fringed trees.

"I have asked for a Christmas gift," I said impulsively.

"What have you asked for?" she inquired.

"I was looking at the blue sky, watching the stars, and I asked that Heaven, as my Christmas gift, might give me some one to love me."

"Some one to love you!" she echoed. Her face flushed, her eyes sparkled, her hands trembled. "Ask for a sword to pierce your heart, for a deadly serpent to poison you, for lightning to strike you dead, if you will; but never ask for any one to love you—never for any one whom you can love!"

And the next minute she was gone.

A kindly, comely woman, whom I knew afterward as Mrs. Harper the housekeeper, came to me a few minutes later.

"Will you go to your room, miss?" she asked. "You must be tired and cold."

Yet, though the wintry wind had pierced me and the frost had seized my hands, my heart was colder still; and I longed for the happy sunny France that I had left.

We went through long winding passages. Mrs. Harper carried a wax-taper, which made the darkness seem all the more profound. The wind moaned fitfully.

"What a dreary house!" I cried involuntarily. "Why do you not have it lighted?"

"There is no gas nearer than Ulladale," she replied, "and that is quite five miles away. Besides, no one cares about having the place lighted up."

"No one cares!" I repeated. "What an extraordinary thing! I thought every one liked to make a house cheerful."

"All the gas that could be made in the world would not render this house cheerful," said Mrs. Harper. "There is a shadow over it."

"The shadow of what?" I asked, with a pale face and fast-beating heart.

"No one knows. I can see the shadow and feel it, but I cannot tell what it is. You are young, Miss Forster, and you must try to be cheerful. Do not let the gloom oppress you. That is the bell for tea."

I looked at my few plain and simple dresses.

"I am ashamed to go down in one of these," I said. "Are there any visitors?"

She laughed a dreary laugh.

"Visitors! No; they seldom come here."

"But Lady Culmore was so superbly dressed!" I cried.

The housekeeper looked at me earnestly.

"In all the country," she replied, "there is no one who dresses so magnificently as my lady; but she will never get that which she dresses for—never."

I took out a dress of plain black silk and some holly-berries.

"I will not forget it is Christmas, if every one else in the house does!" I cried, as I placed a spray of red-berried holly in my hair and one in the bodice of my dress.

A few minutes afterward I stood at the drawing-room door with a beating heart. There was a death-like silence within; the wind was wailing outside, the shadows were deepening and gathering around me. I took courage, opened the door,

and found myself in a magnificent room, lofty and beautifully decorated. The ceiling was painted ; there were fine pictures, a few rare statues, *jardinières* filled with costly exotics, luxurious furniture ; altogether it was a most charming apartment. It was lighted by wax-tapers. Lady Culmore was seated before the ruddy fire.

Come in, Miss Forster," she said. " You will be glad to have some tea, I am sure."

A cozy little table was drawn to the fire ; a silver tea-service, with cups and saucers of Sèvres china, was placed on it. I took a seat, and then Lady Culmore forgot all about me. She sat looking into the fire, holding in her white hand a fan of delicate feathers. Evidently she saw pictures in the fire which I could not see, she read stories there which I could not read.

After a short interval, a servant brought in a silver stand and kettle, and placed them on the table.

" Sir Rudolph is coming, my lady," he said.

I had thought her cold and without emotion, but I saw now that I had been mistaken. Her face changed. The peculiar pallor of the lips disappeared, and the mask as of stone fell ; there was the flushed, passionate, beautiful face of a living, loving woman. I noticed that she placed one hand over her heart, as though she would still its beating. I have never seen such pain, such passion, such intensity of longing in any human eyes as I read in hers.

Again the door opened, and Sir Rudolph entered. I forgot at first to look at him in the wonder I felt at her. The agony in the eyes of a frightened bird when the snake first fixes it would give a faint idea of the expression in hers; yet in them shone a gleam of love—unutterable, despairing love. But, when he spoke, I looked at him. He was not a model of manly beauty ; but he had a face that, once seen, could never be forgotten. He was tall, with the erect figure, the broad shoulders, the muscular limbs that distinguish a true Englishman. The chief charms of his face lay in his mouth and eyes. The mouth was tender, proud, and firm, its graceful lines unhidden by the dark mustache. I could never describe the beauty, the power, and the pathos of his eyes. When they looked at me, they were kindly, clear, and bright ; when they fell on Lady Culmore's face, I read aversion and fear in them.

Sir Rudolph held out his hand, and bade me welcome to Ullamere. His greeting was a thousand times more kindly than Lady Culmore's had been. He said that he hoped I should not find it dull—that he spent his own time in reading, boating, fishing, and rambling over the hills. And all the time he spoke his wife's eyes were fixed on him with the look of a frightened bird.

We sat down, and if ever there was a study, these two, husband and wife, presented one. I see the whole scene so plainly—the magnificent room, with the pale clear light from the wax-tapers, the glow of the fire as it fell on the pictures and statues, the bloom and fragrance of the hothouse flowers. I shall never forget how the firelight fell on the rich dress and jewels, the fair hair and beautiful face of Lady Culmore, and on the dark head and noble face of Sir Rudolph. Had she donned the rich robe and gems to please Sir Rudolph? If so, it was indeed labor in vain. After the first half-shrinking look, his eyes were carefully averted from her. I could see that plainly. It was not careless indifference; it was that he would not look at her. When he spoke to me, his eyes met mine with a frank open expression. If Lady Culmore addressed him, they were studiously fixed on anything but her.

As tea proceeded, the wonder to me grew greater. When Sir Rudolph addressed his wife, he seemed quite unconscious of the constraint and coldness that came into his voice, as she seemed quite unconscious of the pleading that came into hers. There was no attempt at conversation between them. I could not say that Sir Rudolph was wanting in civility or attention to the beautiful woman who looked at him with such passionate, entreating, love-lit eyes; but he did only just what was needful—no more. There was more below the surface, unless I was greatly mistaken. I read shrinking aversion, something more than dislike—loathing even on his part; on hers, love that was painful in its passionate entreaty. Altogether I felt that I was in a atmosphere of mystery. The gloom of the house, the silence that reigned in the splendid rooms, the curious aspect of husband and wife, all confirmed the idea.

One little incident impressed me much. Lady Culmore wore a very handsome diamond bracelet; the gold of the setting of one of the stones was slightly damaged, and hurt her

arm, She raised it suddenly with a little cry of pain, and went over to her husband,

"Rudolph," she said, "will you see to this bracelet for me?" And she looked at him with eyes so full of love that my wonder was that he did not embrace her on the spot and kiss the lovely pleading face.

She held out her beautifully rounded white arm to him and showed him the little red mark caused by the broken gold. In doing so her hand touched him. It was accidental, I believe; but I shall never forget the incident. It was over in a moment; but, while that moment lasted, the scene was terrible. His faced changed; fierce anger flamed from his eyes. He shook the white hand from him as though it had been a viper.

"You forget!" he cried, in a voice so cold and hard that I recognized it with difficulty; and, shuddering, white, trembling, she shrunk away from him.

"Good night, Miss Forester," said Sir Rudolph abruptly. "I hope you will make yourself as happy as you can."

He was gone before I had time to reply.

Lady Culmore stood quite still for a few moments; then she tore the jewels from her hair, from her neck, from her arms, and dashed them upon the ground.

"Am I so hateful, so horrible," she cried, "that he will not look at me, that I may not touch him? Oh, Heaven, am I so hateful, so loathsome as that?"

Suddenly she remembered my presence, and looked at me with a mild, passionate despair that touched my very heart. I went to pick up the beautiful gems strewn upon the ground. I laid them, a glittering, magnificent mass, on the table. She came up to them with a half-shamed face.

"How passionate I am, Miss Forester!" she said. "What can you think of me?"

"I have had no time to think at all yet," I replied.

Then she walked to one of the large mirrors, and stood before it for some minutes in silence.

"Miss Forester, come here," she said, after she had looked long and earnestly at herself.

I went to her, and we stood side by side. She regarded me critically.

"You are beautiful," she said slowly. "You are dark as the daughters of sunny Spain, and your eyes are like dusky

velvet—no, they are like purple heartsease ; but you are not so beautiful as I am." She turned to me fiercely and clutched my hands. "Tell me," she cried—"you have had time to judge—tell me—am I not a woman whom any man could love ?"

"Yes," I replied quickly, half frightened by her strange manner.

"Look at my arm," she continued. "If any other man had been in his place, he would have kissed it; and he flung it from him !"

I have no time to answer. The footman came in to clear the table, and I went back to my room.

CHAPTER II.

What manner of house, what manner of people were these? What was wrong under this roof? What was the shadow where all should have been bright ? I had been tired before, but the mystery and novelty had so excited and bewildered me that I could not rest, I could not sleep. Surely no one had ever spent a stranger Christmas-eve than this.

I drew aside the hangings. Ah me, the sweet white world that lay outside, the beauty of the Christmas night-sky and golden stars ! I could not hear the bells, although I knew there would chime until past midnight ; and I knew how the music of them would rise and fall over the trees, would die away across the snow. I should have wept in sheer desperate pity for my own loneliness had it not been that my thoughts were so deeply engrossed with the mystery of Ullamere.

I went to sleep at last, thinking of the beautiful face of the wife, of the noble face of the husband, wondering what shadow, what sorrow lay between them.

Christmas morning dawned bright and beautiful. I drew near the window and looked out in wonder and delight. There lay the mere, known as Ulla Water, and the grounds of the estate sloped down to the very edge. It was a beauti-

ful lake, on which in summer the water-lilies slept; green reeds and sedges grew on the banks, and in many places the boughs of the trees dipped into the water. There was almost every variety of tree in the grounds—copper-beech and silver-beech, stately oak and graceful lime, trembling aspen and spreading walnut, the pride of the place being a grand old cedar. In its mantle of white snow, with the sun shining full upon it, the scene was most striking. The robins were flying about in search of food, and the laurustinus was in full flower. My heart and spirits rose. It could not be all misery in such a world as this, such a beautiful world, disfigured only by man and sin!

I went down stairs, thinking that, if Christmas-eve were forgotten, surely, being Christians, they would remember Christmas-day! But again there was no recognition of it—no holly, no mistletoe, no cheery voices, no laughter, no Christmas greeting. The house was as silent in the morning sunshine as it had been on the previous night.

Breakfast was served in the dining-room; but neither Sir Rudolph nor his wife came down to it. The old butler told me that Sir Rudolph's breakfast was served to him in his study, and that her ladyship took hers in her own room.

There was nothing to be done but to make the best of it, to take my breakfast in solitude and dream of the thousand happy homes where, on Christmas morning, the long-parted met again, and there was nothing but gladness and love; and, while the sunshine does not deepen the shadow in this gloomy dwelling, I can tell the brief story of my life—how and why I came to Ullamere.

My mother, Mabel Averil, came of a good old English family. When not more than seventeen she ran away with her drawing-master, Alic Forster, a young artist who had dreams of making a name and winning fame. Her family never forgave her, and my father took her to Paris. There he struggled long and arduously. The best engagement he had was as drawing-master to the pupils of Madame Dudevant, who had a large and fashionable school in the Champs Elysées. He died suddenly of fever when I was four years old; and Madame Dudevant, who was a kind-hearted woman, offered my mother a situation as English teacher in her school. My education was to be her recompense—and truly I received a first-class education. Had I been the daughter

of a peeress instead of a poor English teacher, she could not have taken greater pains with me. On my life at the Parisian *pension* I need not dwell. My mother died when I was nearly eighteen ; and after that I could never endure the place, it was so full of painful memories for me. Madame was very good; when I told her how unhappy I felt, she said the best thing would be for me to take a situation in England. She answered an advertisement for a young lady who spoke French, German, and Italian, and was well acquainted with the literature of the three countries. It was essential that she should also be an excellent musician and a good singer. The salary proposed was most liberal, and a comfortable though exceedingly quiet home was offered.

"You will be very fortunate," said Madame Dudevant to me, "if you secure this."

Very fortunate indeed in a great many respects! The salary was one hundred per annum; the situation was that of companion to Lady Culmore, the wife of Sir Rudolph Culmore of Brooke, residing now at Ullamere, in Lancashire. Madame thought she had some reason for congratulating me, and I was only too delighted to have an opportunity of seeing England, the land I loved.

It was on the twenty-third of December that I left Madame Dudevant, the school, and the gay sunny land of France. I was eighteen that same month. My experience of life was limited to that of a boarding-school. I had a vague idea that all married people were very happy, never having lived with any. The only men I had seen were the masters who attended the school and the fathers and brothers of the boarders.

So, young and inexperienced, I was plunged into what I felt must be the very heart of a tragedy.

Mrs. Harper came in to say that Lady Culmore was not very well, and would not be down stairs yet for some time, but that, if I liked, I could have the carriage and drive to Ulladale Church.

"Will no one else go to church, Mrs. Harper?" I asked.

"No one ever goes to church from here," she said sadly. "You will find this like very few other houses in the world, Miss Forster;" and I felt that her words were true.

I told her how glad I should be to attend church. It was pleasant to think of going out into the sunshine amidst the holly and the snow,

Tears came to my eyes when I heard the chime of Christmas bells at last. There was no lack of evergreens in the church; the whole place seemed filled with them. Again I prayed Heaven for my Christmas gift—some one to love me. I thought much, as I knelt there, of the darkened household whence no one went to church, and where they had forgotten Christmas-eve.

I drove home again when service was over, better and brighter for that my first visit to an English church; but, as I drew near Ullamere, the shadow fell over me again.

When I re-entered the house, I found that Sir Rudolph was out, and the butler told me that Lady Culmore wished to see me in her boudoir. The boudoir was a pretty little room leading from the drawing-room and looking right over the mere. I went to her at once, feeling more curiosity than I cared to express. I found her very quiet, very sad, and pale. Evidently the terrible emotion of the preceding evening had exhausted her. She wore a dress of purple velvet that showed her tall graceful figure to the greatest advantage. There was the same deathly pallor on her face, the same curious expression of restraint, fear, and longing in her eyes as there had been on the previous night. she held out her hand to me, half clinging to me, as I noticed afterward she clung to any one who was kind to her.

"You have been to church," she said, with a smile. "You found something like Christmas there?"

"A beautiful Christmas," I replied, "just as I had dreamed of it—all holly and laurel and mistletoe. And I love to hear the old Christmas carols."

"I have not been to church for so long, I almost forget what the services are like," she said.

"Do you not think it rather a pity not to go to church?" I ventured to ask. "It does not matter whether our trouble be of body or of mind, there is always comfort there."

"It would be useless for me," she said—"quite useless."

"But why?" I asked.

And her face paled as she answered—

"If man cannot forgive, how can Heaven forgive?"

"It is just the reverse," I answered. "It matters little about man forgiving, if Heaven forgives. But you—— Oh, Lady Culmore, what a strange thing for you to say? What can you have done for such pardon to be required?"

They were imprudent words, and, had I stopped to think, I should not have uttered them; but she did not take them amiss. I saw a faint motion of her hands, as though she would fain wring them, and then she turned away.

"Lady Culmore," I said to her presently, "if you have a few minutes to spare, I should like to know what my duties are. Up to the present time I have done anything for you."

"Your duties," she repeated vaguely—"your duties as a companion to me? It was Sir Rudolph who insisted that I should have a companion. I do not know. He thought I wanted some one to be with me."

"What shall I be able to do to help you?" I asked.

"I hardly know," she replied. "Can you comfort me when I am most miserable?"

"I will do my best," I answered; and she turned from me with a low moan.

"I want comfort," she said—"comfort always."

CHAPTER III.

"I COULD not describe the misery of Sir Rudolph's household. What the shadow was that lay over it I was unable to guess. Husband and wife were both young and handsome; they had almost every gift that Heaven could bestow; nothing was wanting, so far as I could see, to complete their happiness; yet they were further apart, it seemed to me, than if a grave had lain between them—a thousand times further apart.

That first Christmas-day that I spent in England will never die from my memory. We did not see Sir Rudolph until dinner-time—seven o'clock; and then it appeared to me that my remonstrance respecting Christmas-day had reached the kitchen, for the dinner comprised something in the shape of Christmas fare—a turkey and a plum pudding. Some one, in a moment of ill-advised enthusiasm, had placed a pretty little sprig of holly—a few glossy leaves, with a fair sprinkling of red berries—on the top of the latter. Sir Rudolph looked at it, and then turned to the butler.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Holly, Sir Rudolph," he replied.

"And why has it been put there?" he continued.

"I thought—perhaps—Christmas-day," he said, stammering.

"Take it away!" commanded Sir Rudolph sternly.

And the butler, with great perturbation of manner and a crimson face, removed the unfortunate sprig of holly.

I read the expression of Sir Rudolph's face, and it said, as plainly as words could speak, "I will have no rejoicing, no outward sign of rejoicing, in this house."

And in such fashion Christmas was celebrated at Ullamere. I watched husband and wife, and I was never so completely puzzled. I could not make out the cause of disagreement at all. It was no petty feeling that actuated him, that had caused those lines on Sir Rudolph's face; one could see that. Some great deep emotion was at work within him; and at times it almost overpowered him.

Lady Culmore was beautiful enough to charm any man, yet she evidently had no charm for him. Whatever the mystery might be, I felt sure that it was not that he cared for any one else. There was something so true, so noble about him, that no one living could suspect him of anything wrong. He was polite to his wife, with a cold icy politeness that was enough to madden a woman who loved him.

He never said an unnecessary word to her. When he was dining with us, he did the honors of the table. If, on asking her to partake of any dish, she declined, he did not press her. He never repeated the invitation. When a bow or gesture of any kind could take the place of words, it was made to do so. Any little act of politeness, such as placing a chair or a footstool for her, was performed with a formality and coldness that made matters far worse than if he had omitted it. He never went out with her. He went his way, she went hers. He never interfered with her arrangements. If Lady Culmore asked him a question, he replied to it as briefly as possible. He never offered any comment, any suggestion; in fact, between them a gulf lay wide and deep as the grave. But Lady Culmore, I could see, had a wild, passionate adoration for her husband. She loved him so well that she trembled at the sound of his footsteps, at the sound of his voice. Her eyes were always full of entreaty, full of pain and passion,

She suffered terribly when he was absent; she suffered even more when he was present. In the one case it was an agony of longing, in the other an agony of pain. It was the strangest household, surely, into which any one ever entered. Sir Rudolph occupied the west wing. His rooms were all there—his study, dressing-room, bedroom, gunroom—and overlooked the park. Lady Culmore's rooms were in the east wing. The great drawing-room and the dining-room, with one or two handsomely furnished reception-rooms, were in the centre of the building.

There they met on neutral ground, as it were, but nowhere else. No messages ever passed between them. They lived as perfect strangers, barely interchanging the ordinary civilities of life. Strange husband and wife truly! And the gloom that surrounded them seemed to spread to others. On the faces of the servants there was never a smile. They went about with a hushed subdued air and movement, as though they two felt the weight of the mystery.

"Only on Sunday morning did we all take breakfast together; and a most solemn and funereal affair it was. During the week Sir Rudolph and Lady Culmore never met until night, when we dined. He spent the day in study and sport. She—well it seemed to me that her hours were spent in a fevered dream. I shudder now when I think of them. She was never at ease, at rest, for five minutes together. She would ask me to play and sing to or with her, and then in a few minutes would rise and cry out that it was enough, that she did not care for it. She would begin to translate some foreign work, and, before she had written many lines, it would follow the fate of the music.

"Come out with me, Miss Forster," she would say. I cannot bear the house; it stifles me."

We would go out, and perhaps before we had reached the park gates, she would say, with a dreary sigh—

"Let us go back again. I cannot bear the park."

On the beautiful restless face I never saw for one moment an expression of peace.

The evenings were perhaps the most dreary part of the life at Ullamere. Sir Rudolph never spent them with us. When dinner was ended, he went to his room, and we saw no more of him.

But one evening—ah me, what a night that was!—a most

terrible storm raged. The snow was all washed away, the rain fell in torrents. It beat against the windows as though it would shatter them. The wind was something appalling in its violence. We could hardly hear each other speak; trees were torn up by the roots; the doors and windows rattled. Once or twice the great bell in the stable rang without rhythm or measure. The dogs howled, the servants were pale with fear.

As usual, Sir Rudolph rose to quit the dining-room. To my surprise, Lady Culmore went up to him. This time she did not touch him; she did not lay her hand upon his arm, but she looked up at him with the most despairing eyes I ever beheld.

"Sir Rudolph," she said—and her voice trembled with the passion of her earnestness—"I pray you remain with us; I am frightened. Heaven is angry to-night, and I am sorely afraid. Stay with us."

For a moment his eyes flashed fire. Then, looking at the white face, with its quivering lips and frightened eyes, the fire died out, and profoundest pity took its place.

I thought my prayer added to hers might have effect, and I said—

"The wind and the rain would make any one afraid."

He hesitated half a minute. He did not look at his wife again, but glanced at me.

"Are you really alarmed, Miss Forster?" he asked.

"I should be glad if you would remain," I replied, touched by the wistful entreaty of her eyes.

"Then I will," he replied; and the relief on her face was beautiful to see.

I could not understand why she cared so much for his presence. He never spoke to her nor looked at her, never went near her. If she made a remark to me, he was studiously silent; yet I fancied that he listened with some kind of curiosity to all that she said.

During that evening a feeling of friendship sprang up between Sir Rudolph and myself. He was well-bred, graceful, and accomplished. To me there was a peculiar charm in his manner; there was something more than courtesy, something of chivalry in it. I found that he was an excellent French and German scholar. We talked of Goethe and of Heine, of that most graceful and original writer Fouqué, of whom he

was an enthusiastic admirer. We had a most enjoyable conversation. Several times I tried my best to draw Lady Culmore into it; but, when I spoke to her, he remained silent. If she made any comment, he did not reply; so, from sheer pity for her embarrassment, I refrained from appealing to her. Still it seemed strange. There was the husband, intellectual, a deep thinker, fluent speaker, delightful companion; here was the wife, fair and beautiful as the morning star; yet between them was a gulf that no human power could bridge.

I liked Sir Rudolph. I could see no fault in him; but I noticed one thing. No matter what we said, no matter how the subject engrossed him, the shade of sorrow and sadness never left his face nor died from his dark eyes. Something of pity for the estranged wife filled my heart. Surely she must suffer terribly! He was so kind, so gentle in his manner to me—to her so cold, so silent. To me it became so painful at last that I said to myself that anything would be better than for Sir Rudolph to spend his evenings with us.

What was the mystery? Even as he talked to me over and over again I asked myself this question. I could see no fault in either, nor could I see in either any cause, any reason for the coldness that existed.

It struck ten at last. The storm had abated. Sir Rudolph arose.

"You will not be afraid now," he said, regarding me with a kindly smile. "The wind has fallen, and the rain has ceased."

I looked instinctively at Lady Culmore. His glance followed mine; but the expression of his face changed completely as his eyes rested on her. Then, with a bow, he was gone; and she turned away with an expression of mortal anguish on her face.

CHAPTER IV.

If Sir Rudolph did not like his wife, why did he not leave her? If she had done him any wrong, why did he not punish her? If there was anything against her of which he knew, why did he not charge her with it? Any mode of life must be better than this.

As the days passed on, I saw no difference, no relaxation of severity and coldness on his part, no lessening of the passionate love and bootless worship on hers. It would be always so, I supposed. I wondered in a dull kind of way at times whether I should spend my whole life in the contemplation of a mystery that I could not understand. Neither husband nor wife ever spoke of each other, or I might have gathered something of the truth from what they said. Sir Rudolph talked to me for hours together on every conceivable subject, and I helped him occasionally with some translations; but never once during the time we spent together did he ever mention the name of his wife. I was but young, and had the natural curiosity of youth. I must say I longed to know the mystery of the household in which I lived.

The new year came and was welcomed much as Christmas had been. At times I asked myself if I should remain at Ullamere, if I should not go out into the world, escape from this atmosphere of melancholy; but, odd to say, estranged as they were, I was growing most warmly attached to both—to the wretched husband and the miserable wife. I did not know which I liked best or which I pitied the more.

January, with its ice and snow, came to an end; February, with its faint gleams of sunshine, passed; March came in like a lion. It was well for me that the beauties of nature had power to soothe and charm. I watched eagerly for the spring, thinking that the glory and tenderness of it must surely in some measure chase away the horrible gloom. But there came an evening in March the very recollection of which chills my heart. There was no storm, no tempest of rain, but the wind was blowing as I had never heard it. I

love the wind; I love it, be it the softest breath that stirs the roses and lifts the sprays of jasmine or the mighty blast that rends the giant branches and bends the sturdy oak.

That evening it came in great gusts from the hills, like the roar of artillery, afterward seeming to die away on the lakes. Then it rose again, and came wailing with a long-drawn sobbing sound round the house. I was not afraid. This was what I liked; and when I went to my room, instead of going to sleep like a sensible girl, I opened my window the better to hear it, for my heart and soul rejoiced in it.

Suddenly I heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor. Some one tried the handle of my door gently and cautiously. I did not know fear, but I must confess that at the sound of the handle turning my heart beat fast. I went to the door and opened it.. To my surprise, there stood Lady Culmore, wrapped in a long blue dressing-gown, her hair hanging over her shoulders, her face white as death, her eyes full of fear. Even in that moment I could not help noticing the whiteness of the hands that held the taper.

"I am disturbing you, Miss Forster," she said; "but I am afraid—oh, so sorely afraid! Will you come with me?"

"Yes, Lady Culmore. But what frightens you?" I asked.

"The wind, the wind!" she replied. "I am sure that every lost soul is abroad to-night and wailing in it. Will you come with me?"

She was trembling from head to foot; great drops of agony stood on her forehead; the hand that held the wax-taper trembled. What was it that made the beautiful face so terrible to see?

"You need not be frightened, Lady Culmore," I said. "The wind is always rough in March. You are afraid of it. I think it beautiful."

"It is not the wind that I hear in my room," she whispered. "Oh, come!"

Without another word, I took the taper from her hand and went with her. When we reached the room where Lady Culmore slept, I found that all the lamps were burning. She laid her hand upon my arm.

"I want you to listen," she said, in a low, hoarse whisper. "Listen!"

As she stood before me, with a strained despairing ex-

pression on her face, wild terror in her eyes, and her hand uplifted, I might have been forgiven some little emotion of fear. The scene was weird enough.

"Listen!" she repeated. And then I heard the soft, sad sob of the wind at the window dying away into the faintest possible moan.

"What is that?" she asked me, while a strong shudder shook her whole frame. "Listen again, and tell me, for Heaven's sake, what is that?"

The dying wail of the wind was followed by a soft tap against the window-glass, so soft, so indistinct, that I could hardly hear it. The sound came again and again, until at last the terrified woman flung herself upon her knees with a cry of anguish that I shall never forget—a perfect scream of terror. It rings in my ears even now as I write.

"I know what it is!" she cried. "You must not let it in! Keep the window closed! Send it away! Oh, Heaven, send it away!" And she fell senseless, with her white miserable face upon the ground.

I raised her, laid her upon the couch, and went to the window. The moon shone on the budding trees and on the mere. I saw in a moment that the sound was caused by the tapping of a small spray of ivy against the window-glass. Having found this out, I went back to rouse and reassure her. She lay just where I had placed her, her blue eyes open and full of inexplicable terror.

"Have you sent it away!" she asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"There is nothing to send away, Lady Culmore," I replied.

"Nothing!" she cried. "Are you quite sure? Nothing at all?"

"No. What could there be outside your window?"

I began to wonder if her brain was affected. It was the only possible explanation of her conduct.

The wind had been silent for some few minutes. Then it rose again—the same faint sobbing round the window, a sound as natural as any could be, but evidently full of supernatural dread to her. She sprang to her feet and held up her hand again.

"Listen!" she cried.

"It is nothing, Lady Culmore," I said, speaking firmly, for I thought that perhaps this was but a severe hysterical

attack. "It is nothing, Lady Culmore," I repeated. "Do you understand? It is only the wailing of the wind."

"Ah, no!" she said. "That is what it sounds like to you. Do you know what it is in reality? It is the crying of a little child, quite a little child, standing there. Hark! Do you not hear it now?"

There was certainly some faint resemblance to the cry of a child, the wail of an infant in great pain. I should never have thought of it but for her.

"Lady Culmore," I said, "you must listen to reason, you must be calm. This is foolish, hysterical, nervous nonsense! Come with me to the window. Look and listen for yourself."

She wrung her hands.

"I dare not!" she cried.

"You must," I said. "It is the only way in which you can be convinced. Come."

I took the white hands in mine and compelled her to cross the room. I drew aside the blinds and hangings, opened the window, and made her look out.

"You see there is nothing," I said. "Look at the moon, the water, and the trees."

She turned away with a deathly shudder.

"I must have dreamt it then," she said.

"What did you dream?" I asked.

"I dreamt that I heard some one tapping at the window, and I woke in a great fright. Then I heard the wailing of a child, a pitiful tiny voice sobbing with the faintest breath, and the sound came from the window. I went there, and drew aside the curtains as you have done now, and I saw—oh, that Heaven would darken my eyes for evermore!—I saw a tiny child standing there, dressed in a little white shroud, and he was rapping with a feeble little hand on the window-pane. For one moment the baby eyes flashed into mine, and I knew that if he came in I should fall down dead."

"It was a dream," I said, with a sigh of unutterable relief—"only a dream."

But she broke from me with a terrible cry. She flung herself upon her knees, she tore her fair hair, she beat her hands together wildly, and I spent the remainder of the night in trying to soothe her. Verily I had cause to remember the bitter winds of March!

CHAPTER V.

April, with its soft showers, its odor of sweet violets and growing buds, its sweet daffodils and pale primroses, was passing quickly, but still there was no change at Ullamere. It was nearly four months since I came, and there was the same gloom, the same constraint, the same wretchedness in Sir Rudolph's home; but by this time I had lost all desire to leave the place. All my affection and interest, all my thoughts, were centered in the baronet and his wife.

There was nothing very mysterious about Sir Rudolph, except the way in which he lived. The whole mystery seemed to cling to Lady Culmore. After that night when the winds of March blew so terribly, I had a lingering suspicion that her mind was unhinged, had lost its balance. And yet, even if it were so, that was no solution of the mystery of Sir Rudolph's conduct. A man who loved his wife would but study her the more for any misfortune of that kind.

I remember another incident. This happened in the calm, early, gray morning light. Again I heard footsteps in the corridor, and again the handle of my door was turned. I knew this time that it was Lady Culmore. She was standing outside, with the same terrible fear on her face.

"I want you, Miss Forster," she said. "Come with me;" and as a matter of course, I went.

"She carefully closed the door of her room, placed the wax-taper on the table, and turned to me. The distress in her white face was terrible to see.

"Now," she cried—"now tell me what you hear!" She seemed to breathe with difficulty; great gasps came from her lips. "Quickly," she said—"tell me quickly! What do you hear?"

"Nothing," I replied. "There is not a sound; even the wind is still."

She struck her hands together with a passionate cry.

"You must hear it. You say 'No' to calm me. I shall

not be frightened if you hear it; but, if it comes only to me, oh, Heaven, what shall I do?"

She hid her face in her hands, and trembled so violently that I became alarmed.

"Tell me what you hear, Lady Culmore," I requested.

"The cry of a child. Can you not hear it? It has been wailing round my pillow all night long, until it has driven me mad," she said. "I am mad! Oh, Miss Forster, look for it! I am sure it is here. Some of those wicked servants have hidden it here on purpose that it should cry and frighten me. We must find it; I can bear it no longer!" And the most painful spectacle I ever saw in my life was the spectacle of this beautiful desperate woman searching everywhere for that which did not exist. Suddenly she looked at the door. "Ah," she cried, "it is outside now! It is dying away at the end of the corridor. It is gone; thank Heaven, it is gone!"

She shrank, shuddering, from the door, and sank down upon a chair. She was exhausted, white, trembling. I went to her and took her hands. They were cold as death itself.

"You have been dreaming again, Lady Culmore," I said. "You must remember that you had the same dream before, and how it terrified you. Try to be cheerful. You must be ill or nervous; such fancies and dreams as these do not trouble strong or healthy people. You should go away from here. I shall certainly speak to Sir Rudolph about it; he does not know how ill you are."

She clung to me with passionate cries and tears.

"You must not do that. I cannot go away. Promise me that you will not say one word to him. I will kill myself if you do!"

Her vehemence startled me.

"Certainly I will not, unless you wish it," I said. "You are really ill though, Lady Culmore, and you should have medical advice. These terrible fancies of yours are only the result of illness."

She flung her arms around me, and laid her fair head on my shoulder.

"Do you think so?" she whispered. "Oh, comfort me, comfort me, for my heart is torn and desolate!"

How was I to comfort her when I did not even know her trouble? I could feel how her heart was beating, how she

trembled, while great bitter sobs rose to her lips, and I wondered more than ever what had gone wrong in the life of this beautiful sorrowful woman.

I smoothed the fair shining hair, and the touch of my hand calmed her.

"It is a strange thing," I said to her, "that you should always have the same dream, that you should be haunted, as it were, by the cries of a little child."

Her face could grow no paler; but her head fell more heavily upon my shoulder.

"So strange!" she murmured. "Ah, so strange!"

"You never had a little child, Lady Culmore, had you?"

"Never," she answered.

Had you little brothers or sisters?" I asked.

"None," she replied.

"It is an extraordinary thing, never having had anything to do with a little child, that you should be haunted by the cries of one!"

She was looking at me with wild, distended eyes.

"Miss Forster, you will not tell this fancy of mine to any one?" she said slowly. "I am so afraid that people should think me mad."

Then she promised to try to be calm, to lie down and sleep, if I would remain with her. I did so, and sat down by her side, holding her hand, until at last she dropped into a fevered, restless sleep.

Ah me, how restless! The beautiful head and troubled face turned incessantly from side to side; the lips were never still; and the burden of her cry was, "I did it all for you, love—all for you!" Then came prayers, entreaties, sighs, and tears; but above all rang that one pitiful cry, "All for you, love—all for you!"

In the full morning light I left her fast asleep.

Could it be that the gloom of the house was extending to me? All that day I was miserable. I felt sure that Lady Culmore was very ill, threatened with a severe illness or with insanity. I was sorely perplexed, feeling that it was my duty to get help for her from somewhere, yet not knowing in the least to whom I should apply. I would not betray her. I would keep the secret of her strange fancies and her terrible nights; but I must have the advice of some one as to how she could best be dealt with. The only person I could

think of was Mrs. Harper, the housekeeper; and I went one afternoon in search of her. I asked her to come out with me into the grounds, where I could talk to her at my ease. I told her that I thought Lady Culmore was very ill, and that she required more attention than I could give her. The housekeeper looked sorry and very puzzled.

"I am just as much bewildered as yourself, miss," she said. "This is not like any other household. What lies between those two—husband and wife—I cannot tell, but I fear it is something terrible. They seem to me more like jailer and prisoner than anything else."

"Which is the jailer?" I asked.

"Sir Rudolph," she answered. "I would not stay but that, after all, I like both my master and my lady so well. They seem to me perfection apart, but together they would puzzle the saints."

"Has it always been this way, Mrs. Harper?"

"Yes. The servants in the house are strangers, except the

"Was there anything curious connected with it?" I asked.

"Nothing; every one noticed the intense love of the bridegroom for the bride. I never saw any one so devoted in my life. It was marvelous to see them together. Sir Rudolph brought his bride home to Brook Hall, and I lived there one year with them. Then, quite suddenly, they came here; and they have lived in this strange fashion ever since."

"And you know nothing of what brought them here—nothing of the cause of their being on such terms with each other?"

"Nothing. Everything was bright and happy at Brooke Hall. The house was filled with guests. I remember even that arrangements had been made for a dance, when Sir Rudolph sent for me suddenly. 'We are going to Ullamere, Mrs. Harper,' he said. 'Will you come with us? We shall not return to Brooke Hall.' 'It is very sudden, Sir Rudolph,' I said; and then I noticed how white his face was. I have never seen him like himself since that—never; and that was Christmas-eve. We stopped at Brooke Hall until the day after Chritsmas-day. We have been here just one year."

"But there must have been a reason," I said. "A husband and wife, both young, passionately attached to each other, could not have fallen into this state without some reason."

"I know of none. I have thought it over a hundred times.

"Did nothing happen at Brooke Hall? Did Lady Culmore make her husband jealous?"

Mrs. Harper smiled.

"There was little fear," she replied. "If ever any woman worshipped a man, my lady worshipped her husband. She seemed as though she could not live out of his presence. It was the wonder of every one. I do not think, when she talked and laughed with other men, that she really heeded them. Her eyes followed him always, and her whole heart was in them."

"But was there no warning of what was about to happen?"

"None," was the reply. "The only incident which occurred at Brooke was the death of the nurse, Martha Jennings. She died on the morning of Christmas-eve; but that had nothing to do with my master and mistress leaving home so suddenly. I think, Miss Forster, it will be better for you to speak to Sir Rudolph about my lady. He loved her so dearly once, he must feel anxious if he thinks there is anything the matter with her."

I took Mrs. Harper's advice, and went at once to Sir Rudolph I found him in the gunroom.

"I want to speak to you for a few minutes, Sir Rudolph," I said.

He bowed with a frank courtesy that was his great charm.

"Will you not come in, Miss Forster?" he asked.

"I am too great a coward, Sir Rudolph. I am afraid of the guns."

"I must come to you then," he said laughingly; and he joined me where I was standing on the lawn, adding, "I am at your service, Miss Forster."

But all his geniality died away when I told him that I wished to speak to him about Lady Culmore. I said that she was very ill, and that I was uneasy about her. He was a changed man at once—cold, hard, unyielding. He listened to all I said, and made no answer, except that, if I thought Lady Culmore ill, I could send for a doctor—any doctor I liked. Then his interest ceased.

"Sir Rudolph," I said, "have you—has any one who knows her—any suspicion that Lady Culmore is mad?"

"Mad," he repeated, with infinite scorn—"mad! I wish to Heaven she was!"

And I was left to find out what those words meant.

CHAPTER VI.

The end of the month of May was near, and during all this time I had not seen one visitor at the hall. Just as we were when the Christmas snow fell, so were we now that the roses and lilies were beginning to bloom, save that the outer world was a paradise. The lake-country is, to my thinking, the fairest part of England, with its tors and fells, its mountains and vales.

I shall never forget the sunlight on the hills, the blue deep waters, and winding streams, the laughing green valleys.

I had longed for years to see an English May, and now my desire was gratified. I had never dreamed of anything one half so fair. And this May was the true month of the poets, sweet and smiling. Pink and white hawthorn grew in the hedges; the lilacs and laburnums were all in flower; the fields were so bright with daisies and buttercups that they appeared carpeted with silver and gold, and the handsome spikes of the chestnuts were out in profusion.

Lady Culmore had steadfastly refused to see a doctor.

"Why should I try to preserve my life?" she said, when I spoke of one. "I had one great hope, but it is dying slowly and surely. When it is quite dead, I shall die too. What is there in life to make me desire it?" she cried passionately. "Christmas snow, March winds, summer flowers, would come and go; I should be eating my heart away."

"But, Lady Culmore," I said, "why should you feel and think in this way? Why should not life be bright to you as it is to others? You are so unhappy that I dare to talk to you as I would not to any one else. Why need you despair? You are young and beautiful and wealthy; and have a husband who might—— Well, perhaps I had better not speak of that."

"You do not understand," she said. "I made a terrible

mistake once in my life—a most terrible mistake. I see it now. He will never forgive nor forget it."

"How did you make it?" I asked.

"Through love of him," she answered. "Heaven knows I speak the truth. I never thought of the right or the wrong; I only thought that it was all for him."

"Can you tell me what it was you did?" I asked.

She shrank from me trembling, with an expression of utter despair. It seemed to me that I was about to solve the mystery at last. But she cried out—

"No—a thousand times no! The words would scorch my lips. I did not see then as I see now."

"And you say it was this mistake of yours that estranged your husband from you?" I asked.

"Yes. He said he would never forgive me, and I begin to think that he never will. I had hope once, but now I have none. So I pray that I may die, for the silence of death is sweet, and life is all bitterness to me."

I could not press the question. I could not force her to tell me this secret which was corroding her very life.

As the spring grew warmer, she had fewer distressing nights. I urged her to come out of doors, I tried to interest her in the beauty of mountains and valley, of flower and tree; but in vain.

"My heart is dead," she said to me one morning—I had taken her to Esthwaite Water, and we were sitting on a grassy band. "You see the beauty of the sunlight and the flowers; I do not. Everything is alike to me—a dull hopeless blank."

"Do you not think you ought to try to rouse yourself?" I asked. "I know there are incurable sorrows, but yours can hardly be one."

She looked at me with a faint gleam of hope in her eyes.

"What do you call an incurable sorrow, Kate?" she asked—we were so much together, and she had grown so fond of me, that she generally used my Christian name.

"An incurable sorrow means, I suppose, a sorrow which there seems no hope of assuaging," I replied.

"And what should you think would cause such a sorrow as that?" she asked.

I thought deeply for a few minutes; then I replied—

"There are very few reasons for an incurable sorrow. Death would not be one, for there is the hope of meeting

again in heaven; sickness that has no remedy would not be one, for, patiently borne, it brings a blessing of its own; loss of money is not one, for life holds plenty of happiness without wealth, and hard work hurts no one. I am puzzled to imagine what can cause an incurable sorrow. The only thing I can think of is the doing of an evil deed for which there is no remedy."

"You admit that that is a ground for sorrow that can never be cured?"

Looking at the beauty of earth and sky, of the gleaming waters kissing the green banks, of the myriads of wild-flowers and ferns growing around us, I was puzzled again. All this was the work of the great Creator. Would He who clothed the lilies, who fed the sparrows, give to one of His creatures pain that could not be cured?

"I am beginning to think that there is no such thing as an incurable sorrow," I said slowly. "We agree that evil deeds, sin, crime, are the greatest sources of sorrow. There is no sin, no crime, so great but that Heaven will pardon it."

"Do you think so, Kate?" And the mournful blue eyes sought mine with the first gleam of hope that I had ever seen in them.

"I am sure of it," I replied. "There is no sin so great, no crime so horrible, but that Heaven will pardon, if pardon be asked."

"But man," she said—"why does not man forgive?"

"Man acts with human power, Heaven with power divine. Men in this world judge, reward, and punish according to human laws."

"Then it happens sometimes," she said sadly, "that, while Heaven pardons, men punish?"

"It must be so," I said. "Take a thief for instance. He may repent of his sin, and may ask pardon for it with prayers and tears; all the same, men must punish him. He must be imprisoned, and made, if possible, to give back his ill-gotten goods. So with all other sins. I am quite sure of one thing—that, no matter what men may do, Heaven always pardons a humble and contrite heart."

"Yet," she said despairingly, "my husband will never forgive me. Why should he be less pitiful, less merciful than Heaven? If I knelt and prayed to him from sunrise to sunset, he would wave me away with the same cold gesture. Oh,

Kate, Kate, do not be shocked, but I think—nay, I am sure —that I would sooner have had my husband's forgiveness than the pardon of Heaven." And her eyes sought mine with a wistfulness that made my very heart ache.

"No, you do not mean that, Lady Culmore, for in that case you must have loved your husband with a greater love than you have given to the Creator."

"I did," she gasped—"hence my sin, my terrible sin! I will be wiser Kate. I will weary Heaven with my prayers for pardon; and, when it is granted, I will not cease to seek my husband's forgiveness. Oh, my sin, my sin! It was all for love of him. I would have gone through fire and water for him; and now——"

I looked at her in wonder and amazement. What had she done? What was the sin of which she spoke? There were traces of great sorrow on her beautiful face, but no traces of sin. A few questions from me then, when her heart was softened, would have drawn her secret from her; but I would not ask them. After we had talked for some time, she sat in silence, watching the golden light that played amongst the trees and shone upon the waters. Then she spoke again.

"Kate," she said, "if you loved any one very much—so much that you forgot everything else in the world, so much that you forgot all about right and wrong—and you committed a great sin for the sake of the man you loved, should you not think he would find it easy to forgive?"

"I should think forgiveness would depend entirely on what the sin was, Lady Culmore."

The words seemed to strike her like a blow. She wept silently, bitterly.

"Whatever wrong you did, Lady Culmore," I said gently, "you have suffered enough."

"I shall suffer until I die!" she moaned.

I left her a few minutes afterward to go in search of some rare ferns, and when I came back she was lying with her face on the grass. She was sobbing—

"Forgive me—oh, forgive me! It was all for him; I loved him so."

And I wondered more than ever what was the mystery of this woman's life.

CHAPTER VII.

"Miss Forster," said Sir Rudolph one morning, "will you take a message from me to Mrs. Harper? I promised to be at Bernham Woods by eleven o'clock, and it is nine now; so that I have not time to see her myself."

"I will take any message you please, Sir Rudolph," I replied, grieved that he altogether ignored his wife, who was present.

She looked up, with a deep shadow of pain in her eyes.

"Tell Mrs. Harper that I expect my brother, Mr. Ulric Culmore, this evening, and that he will remain a few weeks. I should like the blue rooms to be prepared for him." The blue rooms were two very charming apartments in the west wing, near to Sir Rudolph's; one was used as a sitting-room, the other as a sleeping-room. "Ask Mrs. Harper to see that a writing-table is placed in the sitting-room," continued Sir Rudolph; "my brother will want to study while he is here."

He bowed and went away. Lady Culmore came up to me, and once more I noticed the excessive whiteness of her hands, the pallor of her face. She clutched, rather than held my arm.

"Kate," she cried, in a low terrified whisper. "Kate, what does this mean?"

"I do not understand you, Lady Culmore," I said.

"Why is he coming, of all the people in the world? Ulric Culmore—why is he coming? I—I am sore afraid."

"Afraid of what?" I asked. "Surely not of Sir Rudolph's brother?"

"Yes, of him," she said. "What is he coming for?"

"To see Sir Rudolph, and to rest most probably," I said.

"Do you think so?" she cried eagerly. "Do you see nothing else in it?"

"What else could there be?" I asked.

"He is a barrister, and very clever," she said.

"That has nothing to do with it," I answered, laughing.

But she continued to tremble, and I left her to attend to Sir Rudolph's orders.

"Mr. Ulric Culmore coming!" said the housekeeper. "I am glad!"

"Do you know him?" I asked.

"Yes, Miss. He came to Brooke Hall while I was there, and I liked him very much. I am glad he is coming. He will be sure to bring some kind of change to this miserable house."

"Then he has never been to Ullamere?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "The last time he came to Brooke was to attend the funeral."

A funeral is an every-day matter, and it did not occur to me to ask whose it was.

"When he was at Brooke Hall, all was right between Sir Rudolph and my lady," continued Mrs. Harper. "I remember that they both drove with him to the station. He will be surprised indeed when he sees how matters stand here; but I think he will improve them. Both Sir Rudolph and my lady are much attached to him."

I remembered the white face and the frightened eyes of Lady Culmore, and I doubted if this were the case so far as she was concerned.

On the evening of the 27th of May I went out for a short stroll through the grounds. Dinner was delayed until half past eight, on account of Ulric Culmore's expected arrival. I wandered down to the lakeside, and stood there watching the gold of the laburnum, the blue of the lake, the rippling green foliage, the brown distant hills, until I was lost in admiration. It was the chill breeze coming from the lake that roused me. I had been absorbed in trying to penetrate the mystery of the baronet's household, and I found that the time had passed rapidly. I hastened back to the house; and, as I stood outside the porch, which was hidden by great masses of white jasmine and climbing roses, I heard a strange voice say—

"You have visitors at Ullamere, Rudolph?"

"No," was the quick reply, "we have not."

"There was one of the loveliest girls I have ever seen in my life down by the lakeside," added the strange voice. "I saw her as I was crossing the bridge—a brunette, perfect in her way."

"Miss Forster," said Rudolph quietly.

"And who is Miss Forster?" asked the unknown.

"She is, as you say, a most lovely girl, and she is as good as she is lovely. She lives here at Ullamere as companion to Lady Culmore."

Then I heard a light laugh.

"I should not have thought you would have allowed that. You were always companion enough for her."

I hurried away. The conversation was not intended for me; and surely he, the stranger, must have been mistaken in calling me a lovely girl! Why, at school the other girls were always teasing me about my dusky hair and dark eyes! Of course this must be Ulric Culmore. I longed to see his face, for his voice was both rich and musical. I was young, and no one had ever praised me, no one had ever paid me any homage. My heart thrilled with delight at this tribute to my beauty.

Then the dinner bell rang. I felt shy and embarrassed; but I had no time to think of myself. Lady Culmore came to my room.

"Kate," she said, "let me go down with you." She wore a rich sapphire velvet, with a *parure* of fine pearls. "Do I look nice?" she asked eagerly.

"You look perfectly beautiful," I replied. "That is a dress fit for a queen."

"But my face?" she said. "Kate, if you saw my face now for the first time, should you think that I had anything on my mind, that any secret was eating my life away? Tell me truly, Kate. Do I look like a woman with a secret?"

I turned so that I could see her plainly. The magnificent dress, falling in graceful folds, suited her to perfection; the pearls shone round her white graceful throat and in the coils of her fair hair; a sweet subtle odor was wafted to me. No figure, no face could have been more beautiful; but, alas, she was right—it was the face of a woman with a secret! The eyes and the lips betrayed it—they were so constrained, she kept such a guard over them. She stood watching me anxiously, as though her very life depended upon my answer. For a few moments I was silent.

"And you do not wish Mr. Ulric Culmore to find it out?" was all I could bring myself to say.

"I do not," she replied.

"Then you must let your face relax. There is a restraint, a tension about it, that tells the story."

"How shall I shake it off?" she cried, suddenly clinging to me. "You are so kind, so good to me, tell me—how shall I shake it off?"

"Forget it," I said.

I regretted my words as soon as they were uttered. She flung up her arms with a terrible cry.

"Forget it! Oh, Heaven, if I might, if I could but have the power to forget it for one hour—only one hour!"

I saw that one of her fits of violent excitement was impending, and that she would not be able to go down to dinner unless it was averted. I talked to her, reasoned with her, admired her dress—admiration of such a kind, poor lady, always pleased her—and, by the time the dinner bell rang, I had quite forgotten my own little gleam of happiness in having been called lovely.

I went into the room with Lady Culmore. She trembled so that she could hardly hold her fan in her hands. Some one came to meet us as we entered; some one with a handsome face and winning voice took Lady Culmore's hand in his and said.

"Why, Nest, you are not looking well! What is the matter? Will you introduce me to Miss Forster?"

Ah me, the thought of the rapture of that moment will cause my heart to thrill with ecstasy until I die! Never till then shall I forget his first glance. So I met my fate—the love that was my doom. It came to me when Ulric Culmore looked into my face for the first time. I remember it was only a momentary glance; but my heart beat fast, a mist came before my eyes, a vague something stirred in my heart; one glance from those beautiful eyes had suddenly roused my whole being into new life.

When I was myself again, he was talking to Lady Culmore, and there was evident anxiety in his voice.

"I cannot think what has changed you so completely, Nest," he was saying. "You had two of the most delicious dimples in the world, and they have both disappeared. I remember thinking to myself that, when I married, I would choose a wife with just such dimples."

How terribly awkward it was! Just as he said those words I wondered if I was blessed with such charms. I raised my eyes suddenly, and found that he was looking at me. I felt as though I had been detected in some terrible crime, and blushed to the very roots of my hair.

Sir Rudolph came into the room and went to speak to his brother. I turned to Lady Culmore, who looked very pale and agitated.

"Pray forgive me, Lady Culmore," I said. "What was the pretty name by which Mr. Culmore called you?"

A sad sweet smile came over her beautiful face.

"Nest," she replied. "It is a Welsh name. I cannot tell why it was given to me. It brings back so much to my mind. I have not heard the name for a year—for a whole year. I had almost forgotten it."

Then I looked up in wonder, for I heard a sound that was quite novel to me—Sir Rudolph laughing, actually laughing, in the most light-hearted fashion. How completely that laugh changed the expression of his face it would be impossible to tell. I had been at Ullamere from Christmas-eve until now, the end of May, and such a thing had never occurred before.

"Kate," said Lady Culmore, "do you think that Ulric will notice Sir Rudolph's manner to me?"

I felt sure that he must; but I did my best to comfort her by saying that we would talk so much that it would not be perceived.

CHAPTER VIII.

The dinner that evening was, for two of us at least, an anxious interval. Lady Culmore evidently did not wish Mr. Culmore to see the peculiar footing on which she stood with Sir Rudolph. He himself did not change his manner in the least. Except for the needful civilities of the table, he did not address his wife. She spoke to him several times, and between us we managed to hide from the visitor the terrible state of things that existed. Yet I saw him once or twice look from one to the other with strangely wondering eyes, as though he could not quite understand or make out how matters stood. He was bewildered and puzzled. And, though it was a delight to me to sit there at table with him, where I

could see the handsome face and listen to every bright cheerful word that fell from his lips, I was glad when we went away. It was such an effort to keep up conversation in the circumstances.

Mr. Culmore held the door open for us as we passed through. He smiled at Lady Culmore.

"We shall not be long, Nest," he said. "It is a barbarous custom for men to linger over their wine."

But I felt sure Sir Rudolph would not join us; it was not his custom.

Lady Culmore could not rest.

"Play to me, Kate; sing to me," she said, when we reached the drawing-room. "Do something that will bring them here; I dread leaving them alone." She was pacing up and down the room, her hands clasped, her eyes full of wistful sorrow. "Sing something that will attract them," she entreated.

And I sang my best songs, French and English. They did not come. I knew they would not. Her agitation increased every moment, until it became almost hysterical.

"What will he think, Kate? What will Mr. Culmore think? He must see—he must notice the change. He will never rest until he knows the cause."

"You may be quite sure that, if Sir Rudolph does not come to spend the evening with us, he will not spend it in talking about you."

I read her fear. Whatever the secret of her life was, she dreaded lest her husband should reveal it to his brother. I knew Sir Rudolph was incapable of that.

I continued to play and sing; but the clock had struck eleven before they came, and then I saw that the gloom and the shadow had spread to Ulric's handsome face and rested there. Yet I felt sure that Sir Rudolph had not betrayed his wife.

Mr. Culmore looked wonderingly from one to the other.

"You must not blame me, Nest. It is not fair to tell tales out of school; but Rudolph would not come. He would have all my Bar stories over again. I told him it was not polite."

Then he came over to me. He talked to me, and the sound of his voice was sweet and pleasant to my ears. Yet I was not so much engrossed but that I saw Lady Culmore

go up to her husband and speak to him. She folded her hands, as though she were uttering a prayer, but she did not offer to touch him. I knew afterward that she was pleading with him, in tones that might have melted any heart, that he would be just a little merciful to her while Ulric was here. And he had answered—

"A contract is a contract. Ours cannot be broken."

The gentlemen remained in the drawing-room for half an hour, and the puzzled, bewildered look in Ulric Culmore's eyes deepened. In his happy, cordial way he made an effort to bring them together. He asked if we should like a game of whist. Sir Rudolph said "No." In his conversation he appealed from one to the other; but Sir Rudolph was impenetrable, cold, impassible—nothing stirred or moved him; and, when Mr. Culmore found this to be really the case, he was too much of a gentleman to persevere. He let matters take their own course, and looked on in silence.

When something or other happened that revealed the gulf between this hapless husband and wife, I saw his eyes fixed on me questioningly; but no words crossed our lips.

Sir Rudolph seemed devotedly attached to his brother; the love that should have been lavished on his wife was given to him. It was delightful to see them together; he was so amiable, so attentive, Ulric so bright and kindly. But Lady Culmore was sorely pained. I did not remember ever to have seen her look so unhappy. Ulric made no change in his treatment of her. He was kind, attentive, and affectionate to her. Either he knew her secret and thought nothing of it, or did not know, and retained his old affectionate respect for her.

Mr. Culmore came to breakfast with us the next morning, and was startled at not finding his brother there.

"Where is Rudolph?" he asked.

"He seldom takes breakfast with us," replied Lady Culmore, her face flushing painfully. And Ulric, seeing it, said no more.

So the day passed, and though Ulric's presence seemed to have brought light and sunshine, it wrought no change in the unhappy relationship which existed between husband and wife. He never alluded to it; he seemed gradually to fall into our strange ways. He was kind and loving to both, ignored the estrangement as much as possible, took the part

of neither, and behaved as well as any man could possibly have behaved in the circumstances.

After a few days Lady Culmore recovered herself, finding that her brother-in-law merely wondered and looked puzzled.

How am I to tell what next happened? What words shall I find sweet enough, fair enough for my story? On Christmas-eve, leaning over the stile that led into the snow-clad meadows, looking up to the night-sky where the stars shone, I had prayed Heaven as a Christmas gift to send me some one to love me; and with the budding of the green leaves, with the singing of birds and the sunshine of May, my prayer was granted.

I seemed to be standing outside the gates of some wonderful land, when suddenly they opened, and the golden light fell full upon me, blinding and dazzling me. At first I thought of Ulric Culmore simply as a scholar and a gentleman; later I began to look upon him as one of the handsomest, noblest, most generous of men; finally I found that his presence greatly affected me. Why should my heart beat fast at the sound of his voice? Why should my face burn at the sight of him? Why did I tremble like a leaf in the wind when he spoke to me? Why did every nerve and pulse thrill at the bare mention of his name? My heart told me that it was because I loved him.

I gave him the whole love of my heart, and I never thought of its being returned. It was happiness enough to me to love him. I never thought of past or future; the present sufficed for me. Heaven knows that I was not presumptuous in my love. To live where I should see him, to do all in my power for those he loved, to live loving him, to die breathing his name—I had no greater ambition, no more fervent hope. To me he stood quite apart in the world of men—there was none like him, none equal to him; that he should ever dream of placing me by his side seemed most improbable. So the lovely month of roses came round while the heart of the child changed into the passionate, loving heart of the woman, and I was a child no more.

How I loved him! And it was no wonder. I had seen so little of life. He was really the first young, handsome man I had known. That beautiful June was the happiest month of my life; not that I forgot the troubles and sorrows of others,

but that the glamor of love's young dream was so strong upon me that my heart was full.

Ulric Culmore had come to Ullamere to study and to rest, yet how often in the early mornings, when the lake was like a sheet of molten gold and the rosy light lay on the distant hills, I found him in the grounds or down by the water-side! And I had not the faintest idea that he came because he wished to talk to me. The knowledge that I loved him with a full and perfect love that was to be my one secret in life, gave me, strange to say, perfect ease in his presence, perfect confidence while with him. So we talked in the early morning hours, under the stately trees, and down by the river-side, the birds singing to us, the flowers sending us their sweet perfume, the sun shining down upon us.

Mr. Culmore liked talking to me. He always took breakfast with Lady Culmore and me. He very often came during the morning to read to us as we sat in the shade of the great spreading trees; he followed us always into the drawing-room after dinner; he accompanied us in our walks and drives.

"How much pleasanter a house is when there is a gentleman to take an interest in matters!" I said one day thoughtlessly to Lady Culmore. I repented the words the moment I saw her face grow pale.

One morning Ulric and I were together amongst the roses. He plucked one and gave it to me; it was a lovely moss-rosebud just peeping coquettishly from its green leaves.

"Do you know what this means?" he asked.

I said "No," that I knew nothing of the language of flowers.

"You do not know what a moss-rosebud symbolizes?" he questioned. "Promise me to try to find out."

Was it the warm sunlight that dazzled my happy eyes? I could not look at him. I took the rosebud, and ran away shamefacedly.

CHAPTER IX.

As I hurried from Mr. Culmore, I almost ran against Lady Culmore. I stopped to apologize.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" she asked.

"I do not know," I replied.

"Not know where you are going, Kate? How strange!"

It was perfectly true. I only knew that I was running away from happiness so great that it dazed me as do the rays of a burning sun. Lady Culmore looked at me earnestly—I would have given the world if I could have hidden my face from her gaze.

"Oh, child," she said, "what is this I read in your eyes? What is it, Kate?"

"Nothing," I replied, trying guiltily to hide the rosebud.

"Nothing?" she repeated, "Lift up your head, Kate, and look at me."

There was no help for it. I raised my head, and looked at her. She gazed into my eyes, and said—

"My dear, the light that is in your eyes is the light that never yet shone on land or sea. Do you know what that is?"

"No," I answered.

"The light of love," she said. "Oh, Kate, what—who has brought it there?"

"The sunlight," I answered, as I ran away a second time.

It was only natural that I should go to the library in search of a *Language of Flowers*, and I read, "Moss-rosebud —confession of love." Ah me, I smile now! But then, when I read it, a great, and almost solemn awe came over me. I felt as a pilgrim feels when he first enters a shrine. Of course it was all nonsense, merely a jest. It was not likely that he loved me. Still I would far rather that he had not jested with me on such a subject. And then the delicious memory of his words came to me. He had said that I was one of the loveliest girls he had ever seen.

How my heart beat! How my whole soul seemed filled with sunshine and happiness! Could any one be wretched in this beautiful world? And then, like an icy wind, came the memory of Lady Culmore. She had loved her husband,

and what was her reward? I remembered what she said when I told her of my prayer on Christmas-eve. Yet, not heeding the warning, I wrapped up my precious rosebud. I wonder if ever one small flower made any girl so perfectly happy before?

When I saw Lady Culmore the next time, her face was pale from excessive weeping, and I could not help wondering if what had passed between us had roused bitter-sweet memories in her heart.

* * * * * * * * *

Dinner was over; it had been the ordinary curious constrained meal, with the usual complete estrangement of husband and wife, the usual efforts at cheerfulness on the part of Mr. Culmore. How I longed to get away, longed for the brightness of sunlight and flowers, for the fresh air and outdoor freedom.

How it happened I cannot fell. I seem to see that evening always through a golden mist. Sir Rudolph was in his study, engaged on some business about the estate, Lady Culmore had disappeared, and Ulric came to me.

"Miss Forster," he said, "do not waste this beautiful evening indoors. Our host and hostess have both withdrawn. Let us enjoy the last rays of the sun. Will you come?"

Would I? My heart went out to him in answer. Whither could he have led that I would not have followed?

"You will not need hat or cloak this lovely evening," he continued.

A black shawl of Lady Culmore's lay on the couch. He wrapped it in Spanish fashion round my head and shoulders.

"I will show the flowers their queen," he said. "Let us leave the world, with all its cares and miseries, behind us, Miss Forster, and go for an hour into fairy-land."

"Where is fairy-land?" I asked.

"Wherever we like to make it," he replied. "We shall find ours near the lake."

Shall I ever forget the scent of magnolia, which was in full bloom and filled the air with perfume? Shall I ever forget the cry of the cushat dove, the song of the nightingale on the far side of the lake, the golden light on the water, the fair blue sky, the scent of the blossoms we crushed beneath our feet?

Just where the magnolia-tree, with its great white scented flowers, stood, the lake formed a little bay. Lady Culmore, who had pretty fancies when she was not too miserable to entertain them, called it "Magnolia Bay." I told Mr. Culmore this, and he smiled at the pretty conceit.

"We will make it our fairy-land," he said.

Such an hour comes only once in life; and it came, thank Heaven, then for me! The water of the lake softly rippled and kissed the green banks; the wind stirred the magnolia-blossoms. Far away stretched the rugged brown hills, golden now in the light of the setting sun. My lover was silent for some minutes, then he took both my hands, looking at them earnestly.

"You wear no rings, Miss Forster," he said.

"I haven't any," I replied, quickly. "Madame gave me my mother's wedding-ring; but it broke."

"I wonder if you will think me very rude if I make one comment?" he continued.

"I should never think you rude," I answered, "make what comment you might."

"As you wear no engagement-ring, I venture to conclude you are not engaged?"

"To be married, do you mean?" I asked, in supreme wonder.

"Yes, to be married," he said.

"Oh, no! How could that be? I have been at school all my life."

"You have never had a lover?" he pursued.

"No, never," I answered.

"I knew it," he said. "Ah, Kate, no woman's eyes are ever the same after a lover has looked into their depths! Yours are clear as the morning star. No lover has ever gazed into them. Kate, raise them to mine."

But, instead of that, I buried my face in my hands.

The birds sang on, the wavelets broke tranquilly against the bank, but above the song and the ripple I heard the voice that held all the music of earth for me.

"Did you find out what the moss-rosebud symbolized? You must tell me. Did you find it out, Kate?"

"Yes," I whispered, almost inaudibly.

"I loved you at first sight, Kate," he said. "You were sitting here by the lake when I saw you. You do not know

the charm of your own face. Yet you will learn it quickly enough when you are in the world of men. I could not imagine who you were, for my brother had not told me of the new addition to his household; but I thought you the loveliest girl I had ever seen; and, Kate, in that first moment my heart went out to you, and it has never come back. I wanted to tell you this days ago, but I have hesitated; you seemed so unconscious of it all. To trouble you with the cares of love seemed like breaking into some beautiful sanctuary; yet I do not see why I should not be happy, if I can. Kate, I love you, and I want you to be my wife."

That was the answer to my prayer.

"I love you so dearly, so well, Kate, that I will devote my life to you. Will you love me in return?"

I did—Heaven only knew how well. But it occurred to me that it would be madness for him to marry me. I had nothing but what he was pleased to call my beauty and my loving heart. I had neither fortune, position, nor connections, and I felt sure that all these were needful to him. I told him that he could not do a worse thing for himself. He laughed, and said that he was the best judge. He loved me, and nothing else was of consequence.

I did not tell him all—how I had loved him from the first moment I had heard his voice. Some few details I kept secret even from him. We plighted our troth by the side of the lake—a troth that has not been broken, and never will be.

His wife! How little I dreamed that I should ever hear those words! I had loved him with a love that was all humility.

"You delight my eyes just as you gladden my heart, Kate," said my lover. "It seems to me always as though you move to some sweet hidden music. You confess that you love me, Kate?"

"Yes; I love you," I replied.

"And you promise to be my wife?"

"Yes—If you really wish it."

"As if I could help wishing it, Kate! I am your first lover, darling?"

"And my last," I said, earnestly.

"That I believe. No lover has looked into your beautiful eyes, no lover has kissed your lips—sweet as they are true! May I have the first kiss, Kate?"

And there, in the glory of the evening sunset, my lover kissed me for the first time; and that kiss bound my heart to him forever.

The sun had set, leaving the water cold and gray, before we remembered how time was flying. The birds had all gone to rest, all nature seemed in repose when we rose to return to the house.

"Mr. Culmore," I began.

"Never 'Mr. Culmore' again, Kate," he said. "Mine is not a very melodious name, but you must try to use it. Say 'Ulric' always when you speak to me."

"Ulric," I said shyly, "do not tell any one just yet. Let me grow accustomed to it first."

"I will do as you wish, my darling," he said, "but for a short time only."

And then, although we were so near the house that any one could see us from the windows, he actually kissed me again.

CHAPTER X.

"KATE," cried my lover impatiently, "there are limits to human endurance!"

"Very small limits they are!" I retorted. "You, Ulric, are the most impatient of men."

The dark handsome face smiled.

"You do not mean it, Kate. If I thought you did——"

"You shall not kiss me again, Ulric; I have made up my mind. Yesterday, I am sure, the gardener saw you."

"He may see me again to-day, if he likes!" laughed Ulric. "If a man may not kiss the girl whom he is going to marry, pray tell me whom is he to kiss?"

That was a problem I was unable at the moment to solve.

"Strange that we should both be thinking of the same thing! I was just about to tell you that human endurance has its limits, and that I shall not bear this kind of thing much longer."

I knew very well that "this kind of thing" meant silence

as to our engagement, but I was so unwilling to speak of it.

It was a glorious morning at the end of June. My lover —Heaven bless his handsome head and dark beautiful face! —had come out to smoke a cigar under the chestnut-trees. As a matter of course, I must go with him. Sir Rudolph had ridden over to Ulladale; Ulric had declined to accompany him.

"We will have a little picnic of our own, Kate," he said, "I will have a cigar or two, you shall have some fruit, and we will improve the shining hours."

It was absurd to resist, to make excuses—which I did hypocritically enough—for nothing on earth was so delightful to me as to be with him.

"You forget," I said, "that I am Lady Culmore's companion."

"I know that you are my companion," he said; "and I shall not give you up, either to Lady Culmore or to any one else."

He arranged a most comfortable seat for me, and placed some fruit where I could easily reach it—rich ripe strawberries and purple grapes.

"Now you have nothing to do but to sit still, Kate, look charming, and let me admire you. Do you know that you look like the morning itself? Your eyes are so bright, and you have the daintiest of colors. Your hair—what dark hair it is, Kate!—all lies in rings and waves. Altogether, I am more in love than ever with my future wife!"

He knelt by my side, kissed my hands, kissed my lips, called me by every endearing name. I wondered for a moment whether he would always love me in this fashion, or whether coldness or estrangement would come to us as it had come to Sir Rudolph and Lady Culmore.

"You are thinking of something disagreeable, Kate; I know it by the expression of your face."

I sighed.

"I will not have you sigh, dearest," said my lover. "Sighs must not pass such lips as yours—lips made for smiles and kisses."

Ah, sweet sunny hours, sweeter than words can tell, how quickly they passed, and how blissful they were!

"I was saying, Kate," continued Ulric, "that I have come to the end of my endurance. To love you as I do,

yet not to be at liberty to give full expression to that love is torture. Last night, when you were singing, you looked so captivating that I could hardly refrain from taking you in my arms and kissing you."

"It was well you did not," I said, wondering what Lady Culmore would have thought.

"You said, dearest, you wished me to keep silence about our engagement for a short time, because you wanted to grow accustomed to it. Are you accustomed to it yet?"

I raised my happy eyes to his face, and told him that the wonder of it was so great that, if I lived for a century, it would still be a source of supreme astonishment to me.

"Evidently then it is quite useless waiting any longer. Let me tell my brother this evening. My darling, I want to marry you in the autumn. Are those tears in your eyes, Kate?"

"Yes, tears of joy," I replied. "I am so happy, Ulric—no girl in the wide world was ever happier; but I cannot forget the misery that surrounds us. If I could see Lady Culmore less miserable, Sir Rudolph more like you, I should not care. I know how it will be when we tell her; she will cry, or say some of those terrible things that one cannot bear to hear, and Sir Rudolph will be colder than ever. Out here in the sunlight, where the waters shine, the roses bloom, and the whole world is lovely, it is easy to be happy and to talk of love; but in that shadowed house, by that shadowed hearth, where husband and wife speak never a kindly word, how can I? I feel that, if we speak of our love there, a shadow will fall over it."

His face grew grave, the laughter died from his eyes.

"I understand," he said, in a low voice, "and I sympathize sincerely, Kate," he continued after a time, "I have never liked to speak to you about the matter, but what can possibly have parted those two? Do you know anything about it."

"Nothing in the world," I replied. "No one could know less."

"Has this coldness existed ever since you have been here?"

"Yes; and it is that which makes me dislike to speak of my own happy love."

"I have said nothing about it," continued Ulric; "but I

was never so shocked, so startled, so distressed in my life. The first night I spent here I thought the coldness was only a passing one—and even that horrified me; but, when I saw that it was always the same, that nothing changed or softened it, I was bewildered. Do you know, Kate, that they were once the most devoted of lovers, that Rudolph was mad about her, and that she, so beautiful and graceful, was sought after everywhere? She rejected some of the best offers in England to marry Rudolph."

"And now is he tired of her?" I asked.

"No, that is not it. I have watched them closely—for I would do anything to bring about a different state of things—and have come to the conclusion that there is a secret between them, and that it concerns Nest."

"Of what nature is the secret, do you think, Ulric?" I asked.

"I read fear and shrinking in her face," replied my lover. "Evidently she has done something which has made her afraid of him. What it can be is a mystery to me. She is so gentle, so loving, I cannot imagine that she would do anything wrong. I am sure it is a strong reason on his part that causes him to treat her in this fashion"

"I pity her the most," I said. "She loves him so dearly; her whole life seems to be a passion of love and pain."

"And I," said Ulric slowly, "pity him the most; I see in his face such an expression of torture. I know that he loved her so entirely that his heart must have been broken before matters came to this pass."

I told him how I had found her by the lakeside, her face buried in the grass, crying to Heaven for pardon—that it had been all for love of him. My lover was silent for some time after that.

"It seems a dishonorable thing," I said, "to try to discover a secret that is evidently kept from one; but, if anything could be done to bring them together or even to re-establish ordinary kindness and civility between them, it would be a good deed."

Still my lover, always so quick of speech, was silent.

"Kate," he said, after a time, "are you sure that Lady Culmore used these words—'all for him'?"

"Not once, but a hundred times," I replied. And then I saw that his face had grown pale.

"'All for him,'" he repeated. "That would imply that she admitted having done something wrong, but that it was for his sake."

"That is what I have always thought, Ulric—that she did some wrong for him."

"What could she have done?" he continued. "She loves him too entirely to have given a thought to any one else."

"No, she has never betrayed him even by a thought," I said. And I saw the dark face grow paler.

"Kate," asked my lover solemnly, "have you ever tried to imagine what Lady Culmore could possibly have done?"

"Never. She is truthful, or I might think that she had lied in some shameful way."

"But what could she have lied about?" asked Ulric. "There was no mystery about their love or marriage; and the lie must have been a shameful one which could part them."

"Candidly, Ulric, I have seen no fault in Lady Culmore except a too great love for her husband. To me her character seems perfect in every other respect. I believe she loves him most devotedly. I think she would do anything in the wide world for him. I can imagine that she might even mistake wrong for right for his sake. Nay, Ulric, I can go further; I believe that she loves him so entirely that she would do wrong for his sake and think it right. Love for him is the master-passion of her nature."

Ulric looked terribly distressed.

"Why," I cried, "the shadow is spreading to you. You look miserable. What is it?"

"A horrible idea," he replied—"a false one, I could swear, but so unutterably horrible that it has made me ill."

He looked ill.

"Tell me what it is," I requested.

"I cannot, Kate. To save my life I would not put into words the idea that has crossed my mind."

Not only had his face grown white, but his hands trembled. I did not like to ask him any further questions. He stamped his foot impatiently.

"How foolish I am, Kate," he cried, "frightening myself with a scare-crow! I must have a terribly depraved mind for

such an idea to cross it. That is the worst of my profession; we are always diving into motives. Kate, this has spoiled our picnic. Let us forget it."

He spoke lightly; but it was in vain; he could not forget. I saw him shudder again and again. He rose from his seat, and paced up and down by the lakeside, his arms folded, his head bent, intense misery on his face. Truly our picnic was spoiled. I went to him at last, and laid my hand upon his arm.

"Forgive me, my darling," he said. "I have a fit of the horrors. I am ashamed of myself. Tell me one thing more. Justice is justice. Tell me, in all her raving and her prayers, has Lady Culmore ever said anything about a little child?"

"Why," I cried in wonder, "that is the very thing she is afraid of!"

I told him of the scenes which had occurred. He stood like one transfixed.

"Great Heaven," he said at last, "I believe I am right! I believe with my whole heart and soul that I am right. Kate, it is all over with our picnic. Come back to the house."

CHAPTER XI.

From that hour Ulric Culmore was a changed man. The blight, the shadow that lay over the others had spread now to him. He was silent, abstracted, and gloomy. At times he seemed to try hard to become his old genial self again, but the attempt always failed.

What was the mystery that hung over Ullamere, that seemed to blight every one it touched? Something about a little child; yet Lady Culmore had had no children, no little brothers and sisters. What could it be? It seemed useless thinking.

The change in my lover grieved me exceedingly. It was not that he loved me less—I could see that—but that his mind was so preoccupied. He had been anxious that our engagement should be made public; now he never spoke of

it. He had been anxious that we should be married in the autumn ; now he never mentioned marriage. Yet I felt quite sure in my heart that it was not for want of love, nor because he loved me less.

One morning—it was the beginning of July, and the tiger-lilies were all in bloom—he was standing in the porch, looking round him with certainly the saddest expression I had ever seen on his face. I went up to him and clasped both my hands round his arm.

" You look so unhappy, Ulric," I said. You have never been yourself since the day of our picnic. What can I do to win back the smiles ? "

" Bear with me, my darling," he said, " until I have made up my mind what to do. Kate," he added suddenly, " you are one of the noblest and least mercenary of women. Has it occurred to you that, if my brother dies without children, the estate and title come to me ? "

" No, I have not thought of it," I replied.

" It is so," he said sadly. " If no son be born to Rudolph, I shall be Sir Ulric Culmore."

He looked so grave, and he spoke so sadly, that I could not help saying—

" You do not look very happy about it, Ulric."

" I am not," he replied. " I—I fear there has been a great wrong done. If—oh, Heaven, how can I even say the words ?—if what I dread be true, I will take neither title nor estate. I would rather go out to the backwoods and make a fortune there."

" Shall you never tell me what it is, Ulric ? " I asked.

" It would serve no purpose, Kate, and would only imbitter your life," he replied. " You say rightly that I have not been the same man since the thought came to me, and it would be as bad for you."

" Are you always going to be miserable, gloomy, and sad, Ulric ? " I asked.

" Not always, darling, I hope," he answered, with a sigh.

" When shall you be your own self, Ulric ? I love the old self the best. You were so bright, so happy and blithe. When will the Ulric I love come back again ? "

" When this terrible doubt is settled," he replied.

" And when will that be ? " I asked.

He stood silent for some minutes, and then answered—

" When I find courage to speak to my brother."

" When shall you find courage ? " I pursued after a time.

" I do not know, Kate ; honestly speaking, I do not know. If I am correct in my terrible suspicion then there is very little happiness for us in this world. If I am not correct, my brother will be so bitterly angry with me for the suspicion that he will never forgive me. I must watch for my opportunity, Kate."

Later on that same day Sir Rudolph called him into the library, and showed him the plans for some alterations at Brooke Hall. He related to me all that passed between them.

" Ulric, come, and look at these plans," said Sir Rudolph. " They came this morning from Millsom, in London. What do you thing of them ? "

The brothers bent over the papers. Their opinions did not quite agree ; Sir Rudolph liked one set, Ulric the other.

" I shall choose these," said Sir Rudolph, pointing to the set that Ulric preferred.

" No," laughed Ulric ; " Brooke Hall belongs to you. Rudolph, let the alterations be in accordance with your taste, not with mine."

" True, Brooke Hall is mine, but I shall never live there. It will never be home to me any more. I hate the place, and I intend never to enter it again."

" Hate Brooke Hall ! " cried Ulric. " Why, I thought you liked it ? "

" I did a short time since ; I do not now."

" How has the place displeased you, Rudolph ? "

Sir Rudolph's face darkened.

" That does not matter, Ulric," he said. I do not care about being questioned. In the natural course of things the Hall must come to you when I die."

" Nonsense ! You will have sons and daughters of your own, Rudolph. I have no wish to succeed you. My career is marked out for me, and I hope to make myself famous."

Sir Rudolph laid both his hands on Ulric's shoulders, and looked into his face.

" We haved loved each other truly, have we not, Ulric ? "

" Yes, and shall always do so," replied Ulric.

" Then take my word for it, brother, that no son or daughter of mine will ever succeed me. You will be Sir Ulric Cul-

more of Brooke; and I pray Heaven with my whole heart that you may have a happier life than mine."

"Yet," said Ulric, "you have had everything to make you happy."

"Outwardly happy, yes. Every heart knows its own secrets. I had dreamed—Heaven knows how I had dreamed—of a very different life from this."

Then the brothers faced each other.

"In the old days we had no secrets from each other," said Ulric, earnestly. "When you were a gay careless young lieutenant and I a struggling barrister, we knew each other's thoughts, Ru. I knew of your love for Nest, and you knew how I was looking for an ideal that I have since found. We had not a secret from each other. We stood, true brothers, heart to heart, face to face, no shadow between us, loving, loyal, and true. Now, Ru, tell me what stands between us."

"A secret," answered Sir Rudolph.

"I know it," answered Ulric. "Whose secret is it?"

"If it were mine," replied Sir Rudolph, "you would have been made acquainted with it long ago. It concerns another, and I hold it."

"Can you not intrust it to me?" asked Ulric.

"I would, but the other who shares it will not. Better far not to know it. It has blighted my life; it might blight yours."

"Perhaps," said Ulric, "I might help you."

"Impossible. There is no help. There is nothing but patient endurance until life ends; and the greatest mercy I can ask from Heaven is that mine may end soon."

"As we are talking, Ru, more in the old fashion than the new, let me ask you one thing. What has gone wrong between you and Nest?"

Sir Rudolph's face paled, and his lip quivered.

"I cannot tell you; I would if I could."

"Is it the same secret that has blighted your life, Ru? Has it come between your wife and yourself?"

"Yes," he replied, after a pause; "it is the same thing."

"And, Ru, will it always last? Shall you never take Nest in your arms again and kiss her with the old love?"

"Never," he replied—"never, so help me Heaven!"

"Has she done that which you never can forgive, Ru?"

"She has," he replied. "I would not answer such ques-

tions to any other living creature," said Sir Rudolph. 'To you, my brother, I may say this much—no more."

"And shall you live and die, Ru, without telling us what this terrible secret is which has spoiled your life?"

"I hope so," he replied. "It would do no one good, and would do much harm."

"My dear old Ru," said Ulric, "are you quite sure that this is wise? It is brotherly love, and not curiosity, that prompts me to speak. Are you wise in this? No man could bear such a burden long. You will break down. Now, while there is time, let me help you."

"You cannot help," he replied gloomily.

"Do you mean to tell me that your whole life is to be spent in this fashion—hidden from the world, blighted—nay, worse, wasted? It is inconceivable. If a wrong has been done, let it be set aright."

"It can never be set aright," answered Sir Rudolph.

"Then forget it. What is the use of brooding over a sorrow that can never be healed? Be brave and strong, Ru. Trample it down, live it down. What is the use of all this tragical misery? Let us end it."

"There can be no end," said Sir Rudolph, solemnly. "Now, Ulric, we will discuss the matter no further."

"Ru, let me plead for Nest. I have never seen any one so unhappy. My heart aches when I look at her. When I think of the laughing, light-hearted girl of three years ago, I cannot believe my eyes. She is like a woman dead in life. Could you not relent even ever so little? Could you not make a grand effort and forgive?"

"My dear Ulric, you mean well; but you do not understand. If you love me, say no more. As it is, so it must remain. And now about the plans, Ulric; you must decide."

And Ulric did decide, with tears in his eyes. He could not bear to think that his noble, kindly, generous brother should suffer so terribly,

Some few days after that, I went one morning into the library, and I found Lady Culmore standing at the window. I knew that Ulric had been writing some letters there. She did not move when I went in, and I did not disturb her. I found my book, and waited to see if she would speak to me, if she wanted anything, or if I could do anything for her.

I shall never forget the white face that was turned to mine.

"Kate," she said, in a low voice, "come here; I want you."

I went to her.

"Have you noticed any change in Ulric's manner to me?" she asked.

"No," I answered. "He has always seemed very fond of you, and is so now."

"Then it must be my fancy. Please Heaven it is so! I thought he looked curiously at me, and spoke sternly."

"There you must be wrong," I said, "for I do not think Ulric could speak sternly if he tried. Lady Culmore," I added suddenly, "I wonder how much of your trouble is fancy?"

"None of it," she answered. "My trouble is real enough. The most intolerable part of it is that I wake at times and for a few minutes believe it is all a dream. How I dread the gradual growing certainty! I love Ulric, Kate," she added, mournfully; "I should not like him to grow cold to me."

"Why should he, Lady Culmore?" I asked.

"I cannot tell; but there has been something I have not liked, something I never saw in his eyes before, although I have seen it in Rudolph's often."

I wondered if Ulric still had the same idea or suspicion that he had spoken of to me, and if it was that which had affected his manner to her.

CHAPTER XII.

Lately we had one visitor at Ullamere, and that was the Reverend John Thornleigh, Rector of Ulladale, though why he came I could not imagine. I was the only member of the household who went to church; the servants were, one and all, Dissenters—even the old butler; yet the rector persisted in calling. He and I had become very good friends. He liked to talk to me. I knew afterward that he loved me, and would have asked me to be his wife but that he heard of my engagement.

His wife was dead—had died when his only son was born; and nothing seemed to give him such comfort as talking to me about her. When the rector was announced, if by any accident we were all three together, Sir Rudolph and Lady Culmore would remain for a short time. It was a great embarrassment to the rector—I could see that. Apart he could talk to them, but together, he looked in a state of bewilderment from one to the other. He saw plainly enough the terms on which they lived; that no necessary word ever passed between them; that strangers could not be less to each other than this husband and wife. He saw that all efforts to draw them nearer together were quite unavailing. It was distressing to him, and, unlike myself, he never became accustomed to it. I did. At first it was uncomfortable enough; but, from force of habit, the time came when I could carry on a conversation with both at the same time, without the slightest embarrassment. The rector could not. He grew confused; he appealed from one to the other. His appeals were met with stern coldness by Sir Rudolph, with an excess of embarrassment by Lady Culmore. Of the two he liked Lady Culmore best. She was always most kind to him, and ready to help his charitable work when he needed it.

I was present once when he said to her—

"Lady Culmore, do you never attend any place of worship?"

And she made answer, "Never."

The rector was a good man. He had a real love for his profession. Moreover, he was clever and accomplished. He looked just a little shocked when Lady Culmore answered thus.

"Do you not think," he began. But she interrupted him.

"If you please, Mr. Thornleigh, we will not discuss the matter. I yield at once. I am quite sure that every one ought to go to some place of worship. I have my own reasons for staying away, and they are known only to One."

What could any man say in answer to that?"

Then the rector grew more confidential with me. He talked a great deal about Sir Rudolph and Lady Culmore. They were two of the pleasantest people he had ever met, he said, and he deeply deplored the terrible estrangement between them. Like every one else who knew them, he wondered greatly what had caused it. He was a true friend

of theirs, and, knowing that, we talked always in the hope that we might be able to do something. But, after a time, I saw that it was impracticable ; there was nothing to be done.

The rector never tired of talking to me about his little child. I went to see him at the Rectory. On my return I told Lady Culmore all about his sweet baby ways.

"Do ask him here, Lady Culmore." I said. "You cannot think how the presence of a child brightens the house. These rooms would be very different with a child playing and laughing, or even crying in them. Do ask him, Lady Culmore," I urged ; "I am sure it would cheer and amuse you."

She grew very pale—so pale that I thought she would swoon.

"My dear, it would simply kill me," she replied.

"How could the visit of a sweet little boy like little Willie hurt you ?" I asked, in some surprise.

She made no answer to the question, and I continued—

"It would please Sir Rudolph, I am sure."

"It would not," she cried ; "you are quite mistaken. It would——" Then she stopped abruptly. "No, Miss Forster; if you wish me well, never let any children come to Ullamere."

"Do you not like children ?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered wearily. "I suppose it is part of the nature of all women to love them."

"I am not quite sure of that, Lady Culmore," I answered. "I have seen and known women who did not like children at all."

So I relinquished my idea.

I was with Sir Rudolph and Lady Culmore another day, when the rector came to ask their help. It was for a poor woman whose child was very ill, and the rector dwelt much on the child's sufferings.

"It seems to me such an awful thing," he said, "for a little child to die of want."

He did not perceive, as I did, how the expression of both his listeners' faces changed, Sir Rudolph's growing stony and cold, Lady Culmore's wearing that terribly embarrassed air that came over her at times. I hastened to speak, hoping that I should turn the tide of conversation.

"I do not think it worse for a child to die of want than for a grown-up person so to die."

The rector shook his head.

"I have a theory of my own about the death of infants," he said.

Thinking to divert the conversation from what might be a dangerous channel, I said quickly—

"What is your theory, Mr. Thornleigh?"

"It is this, Miss Forster. In the case of grown-up men and women, you know the extent of their capabilities—you know exactly what they are; they may be clever, they may be the reverse. But, if an infant dies, you do not know what loss the world sustains; he may be an embryo Milton or Shakespeare. So the death of a child, it seems to me, is much sadder than that of a grown-up person."

There was something certainly in this view of the case; and I was so much interested in it that for a few moments I forgot Lady Culmore. A deep sigh drew my attention to her. I saw her turn away from us with a look of such intense anguish on her face as I had never seen on human face before, while Sir Rudolph had grown white as death.

I hastened to say that this was a new idea to me, that I had always thought adult life the more valuable; then I asked the rector some idle question about the bell-ringers, and Sir Rudolph made his escape. Lady Culmore seemed to breathe more freely after he had gone, and the rector received all that he desired. Thinking over one incident after another, it seemed clear to me that, whatever was the secret, the tragedy, the mystery of Lady Culmore's life, it was connected with a little child.

CHAPTER XIII.

A most unexpected event happened ere long—the rector was invited to dinner. It appears a trivial incident in itself, hardly worth recording, but it led to greater events. It must have been at Ulric's suggestion. Sir Rudolph never asked any human being near the place, and Lady Culmore dreaded seeing any one. I may mention that Ulric had pretended to be dreadfully jealous of the rector and his baby-

son, and that I was both young and foolish enough to be flattered by his jealousy, and thought it a great thing to have such a tall handsome man jealous about me.

One bright sunny morning, when I was starting with Ulric for the lake, the rector was announced, and I was obliged to stay and entertain him—neither the master nor the mistress of the house was to be seen. Ulric's face darkened.

"Is there really no one but you, Kate, to entertain visitors? The rector is what you ladies call 'such a handsome man!' Do not stay long, dear. Think of the pleasant time we shall have, the boat gliding over the lake among the water-lilies—a delightful prospect for a warm day."

"I must hear what he has to say, Uric," I remonstrated.

As it happened, the rector had a great deal to say. He was very anxious about the inhabitants of Ulladale. The town was very unhealthy; and, as Sir Rudolph owned a great deal of property there, he wished to see him and talk to him about it. Some of the houses, the rector said, were so badly built, so badly ventilated, that they were neither more nor less than traps for fever and death.

"Do not think that I am an alarmist," he added; "but, Miss Forster, if fever does break out there, it will be fatal to many."

I advised him to see Sir Rudolph. So it came about that the rector was invited to dinner—an event in the Ullamere household.

It was a warm day. The air was faint with the breath of roses, heavy and still; there was no movement in the sprays of the jasmine. That evening Lady Culmore looked most beautiful. She wore a dress of white lace trimmed with green leaves and long trailing grasses; a diamond star shone in her fair hair, a diamond cross lay on her white breast. She had dressed, as usual, to charm the eyes of her husband, and they never even rested on her.

To please my lover, I wore a pretty primrose silk cut square, with short sleeves. I had beautiful white rounded arms, he said, and insisted on my showing them; they were made to be admired, and he would not have them hidden.

That was the most cheerful dinner I remember at Ullamere. The unnatural coldness and silence of husband and wife were not noticed so much when there was a visitor

present. The rector had plenty to say, Ulric was in better spirits than I had seen him for some time.

Suddenly—I cannot remember how it began—the conversation turned on capital punishment, and the rector quoted the well known words that "the worst use to which you can put a man is to hang him." I noticed that at first neither Sir Rudolph nor Lady Culmore joined in the conversation. They sat listening in silence, Sir Rudolph looking paler than usual, Lady Culmore with an unusual flush on her beautiful face. The rector and Ulric argued the question hotly, Ulric being in favor of and the rector against the punishment of death.

"I have often thought," said the rector, "that those words, 'a life for a life,' are capable of many interpretations."

"Do you not believe," asked Ulric, "that the man who deliberately takes a human life should pay the penalty of his crime with his own?"

"No, I do not," replied the rector. "Men are such strange mixtures of good and evil. I do not see the use of hanging a man. It does no good; it cannot restore the dead to life."

"It deters others from committing the same crime," declared Ulric.

"I do not think so," said the rector. "When a man in the heat of passion kills another, he does not stop to think about the last execution."

"Opinions differ," said Ulric. "Where life is taken in the mad heat of passion, it is perhaps hardly murder. It is when life is taken after cool, calm deliberation, after thought and reflection, that I call the deed murder."

The word fell painfully on our ears.

"It is a horrible word—'murder,'" I said. "The very sound of it is terrible."

"I read a strange story the other day," said the rector, "one that struck me very forcibly. A man murdered his wife, how or why I forget; she had given him some provocation perhaps. He ran away, when, of course, a 'hue and cry' was sent out, and the police were soon after him. He had hidden himself in a low part of the town, and in the very house where he was concealed a terrible fire occurred. A poor woman was sleeping in one of the upper rooms, and

her cries were heard. This man who had murdered his wife risked, absolutely risked his life to save the woman who was a stranger to him. He rushed through the flames and suffocating smoke ; the hair was burned from his head, his face and hands suffered, but he saved her life. While she was in the act of blessing and thanking him for it, the police captured him. ' You will hang me for killing my wife,' he said to them. ' I killed her because she provoked me ; but I am sorry for it.' Some one present quoted the words, ' A life for a life.' ' That is Scripture,' said the man lmly. ' I have literally fulfilled it. I killed my wife, but I have given life to this woman, inasmuch as I have saved her from death. Truly it is a life for a life.' The story struck me as being a strange one," added the rector.

Something induced me to look at Lady Culmore's face. Her eyes were fixed on the rector's face ; she hung upon each word that fell from his lips. There was a strange light in her eyes that I had never seen there before.

" Yes," said Ulric ; " but the man was mistaken. The proper reading of the words is that whosoever takes a man's life shall pay for it with his own."

" If one life pays for another," Lady Culmore broke in, " how can it matter whose life it is ? "

Every one looked up in wonder. Her clear, sweet tones vibrated through the room, her beautiful face was flushed. Sir Rudolph regarded her in astonishment. She went on—

" If any one takes a life and gives a life, does not that equalize matters ? " she asked ; and I detected something of scornful bitterness in her voice. " If the life given be more valuable than the life taken, does not that more than discharge the debt ? "

" No," said the rector, in a distinct voice that seemed to startle us—" no. That is the view of a distorted mind, Lady Culmore, of one that does not distinguish clearly between right and wrong."

I saw her shrink as she would have shrunk from a blow.

" What a gloomy conversation ! " cried Ulric suddenly. " How can we have drifted into it ? Let us dismiss the subject. Lady Culmore, you ought to have dismissed us."

" I have been greatly interested," she said ; and again there was something new and strange in her voice, while the light still flashed in her eyes.

During the long discussion husband and wife hardly looked at each other, But at the words "a life for a life" I saw Lady Culmore raise her eyes and fix them on her husband's face. Who could read them with their messages of love, regret, and hope ?

So the evening passed; and, when the rector had gone, Sir Rudolph, witht a hasty "Good night," retired also. Lady Culmore, who seemed quite abstracted, walked to the window and drew the blind aside. She stood there looking out into the darkness.

"Kate," whispered my lover, "come here ; I want you ;" and we went into the conservatory which was dimly lighted. "My dear"—with a quiet caress—"you have behaved wonderfully well this evening."

"I always behave well, Ulric."

"You did not flirt with the rector at all, and I must make full amends. He has a fine face ; he argues well too. Kate, I am sure that he admires you. Does the bracelet fit, darling ? "

This was merely an excuse to hold up my arm and kiss it. I pointed to Lady Culmore standing at the window.

"She will not see me," said Ulric ; "and if she does, it will not matter. Fancy, dearest, what I suffer, sitting all night watching your beautiful face, and never able to kiss the lips I love or gaze into the eyes that hold all bliss for me. Kate, I must be indemnified !"

It was useless pointing to Lady Culmore. It was useless to do or say anything ; and, to be quite honest, perhaps I did not mind so very much.

"Remember," said my lover, with a flush on his handsome face—"remember that I shall speak to my brother to-morrow. I will not put up with another day's delay."

He bade me "Good night," in his usual lover-like fashion, and went away. Then I crossed over to Lady Culmore. She turned to me when I spoke to her.

"Oh, my dear," she said, "who is it ?"

"Who is what ? " I asked.

"You should see your own face, Kate ; you should see your own eyes. As we stand side by side, you are the very picture of happiness, as I am the picture of woe."

I was ashamed of myself. I wished that I could drive the light of happiness from my face and eyes.

"I am haunted," she said, "those words, 'a life for a life.' What a strange conversation that was, Kate!"

"Neither cheerful nor pleasant," I replied. "And, if I were you, Lady Culmore, I would forget all about it."

"I wish," she cried, passionately, "that I could forget all about myself, even to my very name!"

CHAPTER XIV.

Ulric had no chance of fulfilling his threat on the following day, for Sir Rudolph rode off early in the morning to Ulladale, to inspect the houses of which the rector had spoken. The heat was intense. The heavens were like molten brass. The white lilies drooped, the roses hung their heads; the birds had hidden themselves in their leafy coverts; there was not a ripple on the lake, not a whisper of wind from the mountain-tops to relieve the settled intense heat.

"I wish Sir Rudolph had not gone to Ulladale to-day," said Lady Culmore; "it is so hot, and he will be in and out of these horrible houses. I shall be miserable about him. I have such a sense of coming sorrow on me."

Ulric laughed.

"Now, Nest, we will not have that. Things are bad enough; we will not have any foreboding of coming sorrow."

"I cannot help it," she said, with pale, trembling lips.

It was a long quiet day. Ulric and I spent the morning under the cedar. He read and I worked, with various little happy interludes.

Night came, and Sir Rudolph returned in safety. Although Lady Culmore had been anxious concerning him all day, she did not go out to meet him; she gave utterance to none of the joy she felt at seeing him; but I saw that her whole heart went out to him, though she repressed all outward sign of emotion.

Dinner was an utter failure; no one was hungry, no one could eat. Even Ulric succumbed to the heat, and had little to say.

In the drawing-room afterward, Lady Culmore, in her white dress, seated herself in the shadow. Sir Rudolph opened the windows wide, and pushed away the hangings.

"Let us have what little air there is," he said.

"Kate," exclaimed Ulric, suddenly, "sing for us. I found a quaint song the other day, and I brought it home with me."

He placed it on the piano, and I sang it. It was called "Two Pictures."

"I sat in the gathering shadows,
And I looked to the west away;
There the hand of an unseen artist
Was painting, at close of day,
A strange and beautiful picture
That filled my soul with awe,
And made men think of the city
No mortals ever saw.

'Paint me, O wonderful artist,'
I cried, when the shadows came,
And hid the marvelous glory
Of the western hills aflame—
'Paint me the face of an angel!'
And, lo, before my eyes
Was the face of my sainted mother
Who dwells in Paradise!

"Paint me the face of a sinner!"
A darker shadow swept
Down the hills, and I thought, in the twilight,
The unseen artist wept;
And, lo, from a magical pencil
A face in a moment had grown,
The sad white face of a sinner,
And I knew it for my own!"

Two white hands were laid gently upon my shoulder, and a tearful voice whispered—

"Kate, do you love me?"

"You know that I do, Lady Culmore," I replied.

"Then do not sing another note; I cannot bear it. I used to sing once. My voice, they said, was sweet and clear as a silver bell; and I loved music."

"I have never heard you sing, Lady Culmore," I said.

"I have not sung a note since—since we came here," she returned; "and I never shall sing again." And then we parted for the night.

The rector had not been near us all day, nor had we had any news of little Willie; but on the following morning, when we sat at breakfast, all four together, for a wonder, he was announced. He came in looking very anxious, with dark shadows beneath his eyes. Before he greeted us he cried, in a distressed voice—

"Little Willie is very ill."

We were all grieved. The poor rector seemed heart-broken.

"What is the matter?" asked Ulric. "One must not attach too much importance to the ailments of children. They seem to be at death's door one day, and they are quite well again the next."

"Yes; but he is very ill," said the rector gravely. "I was sent for early this morning to visit the poor woman who lives by the west lake. As I was returning, I met Dr. Johnston, who had just been to see my little boy, and he tells me that he is very ill indeed. I thought I would call here, and ask you to let the groom drive me home. I shall reach the Rectory so much more quickly."

Sir Rudolph insisted on driving him himself; and he left us all very sorrowful.

That evening we were just finishing dinner, when a note came from the Rectory which was addressed to me. It told the terrible news that little Willie was ill of small-pox of the malignant type. The nurse had taken him to some cottage where a woman lay stricken with it, and the child had caught the contagion. To add to the rector's distress, the nurse had fled from the house when she discovered what was the matter; the young housemaid, afraid of losing her good looks, also left at once, and there was no one to attend to his darling boy but the old housekeeper. I read the letter aloud, and then rose from my chair.

"Lady Culmore," I said, "will you let me go to the Rectory? I will nurse the child; I am not afraid, and I love little Willie. He must not want for care."

Ah, there was the same strange light on her beautiful face that I had remarked before, the same clear unearthly radiance in her eyes!

"No," she replied, "I will not let you go, Kate. If it be really malignant small-pox, it is very contagious, and generally fatal."

A strong arm was thrown around me; I felt myself drawn close to a faithful loving heart.

"You are not your own to do what you like with. You are mine, and I forbid you to go."

I clung to Ulric, weeping.

"The little child—I must go to the little child!" I sobbed.

"You shall not go near it," he said. "You are mine. There are plenty of clever trained nurses who can do the work better than you. I will not let you risk your life."

We have forgotten the presence of others; we had forgotten everything except each other. An astonished cry from Lady Culmore roused me.

"Ulric!—Kate!" she exclaimed.

My lover raised his dark handsome flushed face.

"I forgot," he said. "I was going to tell you this morning. You know nothing of this. Rudolph, my brother, Nest"——I noticed, even at that moment, that he did not say, "Nest, my sister"—"I love Kate, and she has promised to be my wife."

The next moment Sir Rudolph had crossed the room, and, taking me from Ulric's arms, kissed me.

"A good and charming wife you will have, Ulric," he said; and then a great sadness came over his face. I knew he was thinking of the time when he had made choice of a wife.

Lady Culmore came up to me hurriedly.

"Kate, I half guessed it. I was sure you loved some one; I have seen such a love-light in your eyes. I am very glad it is Ulric, for he will be so good to you."

She threw her arms around me, and, as she kissed me, I heard her sigh. Neither husband nor wife looked at each other. On Sir Rudolph's face there was an expression of great relief.

"Your news is good news to me, Ulric," he said—"very good news. Welcome, Kate!"—to me. And for the first time I noticed toleration in his eyes when he looked at Lady Culmore.

I thanked them for their kindly greeting, resolving in my heart that I would be a true and loving sister to them.

"But little Willie," I said—"we must not forget him. You who love me let me go to nurse him. I shall come back soon; I am not afraid. The little one will die without care."

"Once and for all, I say 'No!" cried Ulric. "You shall not go. I am sorry for the rector, sorry from my heart for the child; but I cannot sacrifice you for them. What do you say, Rudolph?"

"I say decidedly that she must not go," replied Sir Rudolph. "I will not hear of it."

Then Lady Culmore came to us.

"No, you must not go, Kate. For you are love, life, and brightness; for me—— Ah, well, dear, you would fill any station far better than I should! I will go to nurse the sick child."

She turned to her husband, her face eagerly expectant. She went up to him with clasped hands. She did not touch him; one rebuff had been enough for her.

"Heaven has sent me this chance," she said. "You see it for yourself. Oh, let me go! Do not refuse me, Rudolph. It is my first prayer to you since——"

"Hush!" he said, but not unkindly. "Hush!"

"Let me go, Rudolph!" she cried. "Heaven has sent me this chance; let me avail myself of it. You know, you know"—and, as she bent her head near him I heard her say, "'a life for a life.' Let me save this one; let me give mine for it, if needs must be! Say that I may go, Rudolph!"

Still he hesitated, and a look came into his eyes that I had never seen there before. He must have loved her with desperate passion once.

"You ask me to let you go to certain death. Do you know that?"

"Yes, I know; but I may save a life. In any case, I shall offer mine for it. And, if I die, you will forgive me? Ah, do not turn from me, Rudolph, beloved; do not be angry with me! You will forgive me when I lie dying; and Heaven will be good to me, and let me die when I am looking on your face. Oh, beloved, I will die a hundred deaths for one word of pardon from you—a hundred deaths!"

His eyes were full of tears. I saw that he dared not trust himself to speak.

"Certain death has no fear for me with the prospect of your forgiveness and a farewell from you when I lie in the dark shadow. Oh, beloved, what is my life but living death? Oh, love, if I loved you less, I should suffer less! May I go?"

When I asked the question, he had answered promptly, "No;" when she asked it, he hesitated. Yet from that moment I knew that he loved her with his whole soul. What could possibly have come between these two who loved each other with so great a love? Ulric and I looked on fascinated. They forgot us.

"Think," she said to him, "what an atonement it will be! When you remember, my sin, you will remember also the amends I tried to make. Ah, beloved," she cried, bursting into passionate tears, "you told me yourself you could love me no more in life, but you might in death! Oh that I might die—die by fire, by torture, by the sword, if with it I might have pardon from you and die looking on you! Rudolph beloved, may I go?"

He was none the less a brave man that the tears fell from his eyes as he answered—

"Yes."

CHAPTER XV.

THERE was some little commotion in the household when it was known that Lady Culmore had gone to the Rectory. Was the master mad, the servants asked each other, to let her go there when he knew what had happened? A beautiful creature like that to go into the very arms of death?

Mrs. Harper came to me with tears in her eyes.

"I always thought it would end in this way," she said. "You will see, miss, my lady will die. I say she is a saint and a martyr, let who will say different."

And indeed that seemed the only opinion about the matter. Small-pox had been almost unknown in the pretty town of Ulladale. Some poor girl born there had been in service in Liverpool, had come home ill with it, and from her the contagion had spread. The people were terrified. Neither for love nor money could the rector get any one to go to his house.

Sir Rudolph was restless and miserable after his wife was gone. Ulric and I made no allusion to the discussion that

had taken place between them. It was a sacred matter between husband and wife. Whatever wonder or curiosity it raised in us, we never spoke of it.

We were very dull at Ullamere after Lady Culmore went. Happily one of the housemaids had no fear, and would accompany her, so that we had the comfort of knowing that she was not alone. Neither Sir Rudolph nor Ulric had any fear of contagion. They went over to the Rectory two or three times every day. Lady Culmore never saw them; she would not leave little Willie, and the rector would not allow them to enter the house.

Day succeeded day, and still the little fellow lay battling with the fell disease. On all sides we heard hearty praises of Lady Culmore. Meanwhile a nurse from London had been installed at the Rectory, but little Willie would have none of her. The servants said that Lady Culmore was giving her life for him, little knowing how true their words were. At first none of the doctors had hope. Malignant small-pox at the age of three was most exceptional, and they did not see the slightest chance of recovery; but Lady Culmore's nursing was so invaluable that, if anything could save him, that would. Onlookers related afterward, with tears in their eyes, how she nursed and tended the little one; how she soothed his long agony; how she never left him either by night or day, but was satisfied with broken snatches of sleep by his side; how the little fellow moaned for her, cried for her, and would never be pacified but by her.

"She is giving her life for him," they said to one another, little thinking how true their words might prove.

It was an anxious time for us; and Sir Rudolph was most unhappy. At last news came from the Rectory. Little Willie was decidedly better; he had asked for the kitten and for "Kate." Ulric's face cleared as he read the letter.

"We shall have some happy days yet," he said. "I shall be glad to see the child safe and well."

Years afterward I saw the letter that Lady Culmore wrote to her husband when the child was believed to be out of danger, little dreaming that, after all her care, he would be amongst the angels first.

"Beloved Rudolph,—Do you remember the words, 'a

life for a life'? I took away one; I have saved another. The child is out of danger, and will recover; but I am very ill. Shall I come home to die, or will my atonement be more complete if I remain away from you? Remember, you promised that I should die looking on your face. I feel that Heaven has forgiven me."

There were weeping and wailing at Ullamere when it was known that Lady Culmore lay at death's door. She had not been smitten down by small-pox, although she had hung over the child night and day, soothing him; but fever had stricken her. She had no warning of her coming illness. She fell one night as she was singing the child to sleep. She rallied sufficiently to write that letter, and she rallied no more.

Every precaution was taken, and Lady Culmore was brought to her old rooms in the eastern wing.

She was alarmingly ill. The doctors called it low fever. I think that it was exhaustion, and that she had really given her life to the child. She had all her senses, all her faculties, but no strength. She could not raise her hands. To my intense delight, I was allowed to help in nursing her; and I tried my best to cheer her. The sun came shining into her room; the summer air was sweet now with heliotrope and mignonnette. We could hear the birds singing, and the wind stirring the branches of the trees. But there were no terrible fancies now, there was no dream of a child's voice crying, or of a child's tiny hand rapping against the window-pane. Sometimes in her sleep she spoke of little Willie.

One morning she called me to her. I knelt down by her side, and she drew my face down to hers.

"Kate," she said, "I loved you the first moment I saw you, I am glad, my dear, that you will be Lady Culmore."

"I shall never be Lady Culmore," I said. "I am to be Ulric's wife."

"Rudolph will never marry again, and I am going to die," she replied. "You will be Lady Culmore, Kate, and I am glad of it. I wonder when I shall die? I am impatient for the time, for I have a fancy that Rudolph will let me die in his arms. Let me know when the doctors tell you that my hour is come. When I am gone, you will all know the truth about me. I could not bear that you should know it while I

live; but you cannot hurt me by words or looks when I am dead."

"Nor would I ever willingly hurt you at all," I said; but she whispered faintly—

"You do not know, dear; you do not know what I did."

I do not care!" I cried impetuously. "I am quite sure you could not do anything very wrong."

"You think so?" she murmured, with a faint wringing of the hands. "Kate, you will know my story some day; always remember that it was for his sake, and because I loved him so. You must not forget."

Thinking over the whole story as I do now, I am sure that the best thing she could have done was to keep her sad story secret. Even loving her as I did, I could not, after I had heard it, have gone to her and kissed her. It was much better that we should not know the truth while she still lived. What could we have said to her?

One evening Lady Culmore was lying, as I thought, fast asleep. Everything in the house was calm and still; not a sound broke the silence. It was my turn to sit up with her, and one of the nurses sat in the adjoining room. I was thinking that Lady Culmore slept soundly, and was perhaps a trifle better, when suddenly she opened her eyes, with a bright, pleased, surprised smile. She half raised herself on her elbow, and looked at the door. Even to this hour I can recall the thrill of horror that passed through me when I saw and heard her. With a bright smile she looked at the door, and held out her hands, as though in loving greeting.

"Little Willie," she exclaimed, in her low weak voice, "little Willie, how did you come here?" Her eyes seemed to follow some shadowy form, as though it moved from the door to her bedside. "Little Willie," she cried again, "what has brought you here?" She seemed to wait for his answer; and then she added, "To take me with you—me? Are you quite sure, darling?" Another pause; then she said, "Of course I will. I must see Sir Rudolph; then I will come. Wait for me, little Willie."

I knew that he was at home in his little white bed, fast asleep, and well watched. I touched her gently.

"Lady Culmore," I said, "you are dreaming."

She looked at me, and I saw death in her eyes.

"I am not dreaming, Kate; I am wide awake. Do you

see little Willie? There he stands, my dear, the little darling child. He says that he has come for me, that he has been sent for me—wretched, guilty, miserable me!"

"Dear Lady Culmore, you are dreaming," I said. "Little Willie is safe at home."

"She does not see you, Willie dear," she remarked faintly; "but I do. Wait for me. Kate, call Sir Rudolph; the message has come."

Yes, there was death in her eyes, those beautiful eyes that had shed so many tears, and would shed no more. I roused the nurse, and sent for Sir Rudolph and Ulric. Verily the hour was come.

In less than five minutes they were both in the room, and, looking at the white face on the pillow, they saw at once that the Angel of Death stood over her.

"My poor Nest!" cried Sir Rudolph; and he sank upon his knees with a bitter cry.

Before I relate what happened next, let me say that the first news which reached us in the morning was that little Willie was dead. He had died quite suddenly in the middle of the night.

CHAPTER XVI.

Lady Culmore opened her eyes at the sound of her husband's voice, and laid her hand upon his bowed head.

"You will let me touch you, Rudolph," she said, "now that I am dying? You promised me forgiveness, and a last farewell. Oh, love, kiss me! Oh, love, how I have loved you!"

The sweet faint voice sounded clearly and distinctly in the room. She looked round on Ulric and myself with loving eyes.

"You will tell them when I am dead," she said. "Tell them all the truth, and let them judge me as they will. If I have sinned, I have suffered. To live near you always, to see you, to breathe the same air with you, to be called by your name, yet to be further apart from you than an utter stranger—oh, love, that has been torment to me! I have seemed to

die every hour since that horrible night. I see my sin, my terrible sin, and I am glad to die." With a sudden accession of strength, she rose and cried, in a voice that was almost terrible, "Love, let me die in your arms!"

"Grant her request, Rudolph," said Ulric.

Sir Rudolph rose from his knees and took her in his arms. With a cry that I shall never forget, she laid her head upon his breast.

"Let me die looking on you," she said in a plaintive voice; and, clasping her arms around him, she added, "Listen to me, beloved! Here, on my deathbed, I avow the great sin of my life. It has been wild, mad, passionate, love of you. I have given you the love I should have given to Heaven. I have lived for you, sinned for you—I die for you."

He bent down—ah, thank Heaven he did it!—and kissed the pale lips. He whispered something to her, and she replied. Then I heard her say—

"Tell them as soon as I am dead, Rudolph, before you call strangers in."

She lay silent for some minutes, with a light of rapture on her face.

"At last—oh, my love, at last!" she said. "Rudolph, say once more that you forgive me."

"I forgive you, my darling," he answered, his voice trembling—"I forgive you. Die in peace; and may Heaven pardon you as I do."

I saw a smile pass over her pallid features; and she died, as she had prayed that she might, with her eyes fixed on his face.

He laid her down gently to rest, weeping such bitter passionate tears as men seldom shed.

"Have I been too hard on her?" he cried. "Have I judged her too harshly? Was I too severe? Oh, Nest, it is all too late now!"

Too late! Her ears were closed to all mortal sounds. Words of love or regret, of passion or sorrow, would reach her never more.

"A life lost, wrecked, ruined!" he said. "Oh, Nest, in our happy young days how little we dreamed of this! Mercy is best. I—I wish I had been more merciful. But she died as she wished to die."

Ulric and I stood by in silence. Sir Rudolph knelt down by the dead woman's side, and I cannot think of his passion of grief now without tears.

The pent-up love of long months was lavished on her then. He kissed the white brow and the golden rippling hair, he called her by every endearing name. One such word a few short hours before would have flooded her whole soul with joy; now the white face was still, and the lips that had sighed, pleaded, and prayed, were closed forever.

"Kate," whispered Ulric, "come away. We will leave him here."

But Rudolph looked up at us with weeping eyes.

"Nay," he said, "do not go yet. You know what she said. I was to tell you her story as soon as she was dead. Let me tell it to you now, and it will be buried with her."

So standing there, his hand clasping the hand of his dead wife, Sir Rudolph told us the story of her life and her sin.

When Sir John Culmore, father of Rudolph and of Ulric, died, he left three sons—the eldest, Richard, who succeeded him; the second, Rudolph, who was then a captain in the Army; the third, Ulric, my lover, who was a barrister practicing in town. When Sir John died, he was succeeded by his eldest son, who then became Sir Richard Culmore of Brooke. He was a kind generous man, and devoted to his brothers. Captain Rudolph Culmore and Ulric spent the greater part of their leisure time at Brooke. Between the brothers the greatest possible affection—nay, the most tender love existed.

They resembled each other greatly. They were tall, dark handsome men, noble and generous. The two younger sons had but a very small patrimony. Rudolph lost the greater part of his money in some speculation by which he had hoped to double it; Ulric worked hard at his profession. Sir Richard was generosity itself. He insisted upon making both brothers a very handsome allowance. They were unwilling to accept it, but they made a compromise. They agreed to take it until the elder brother married; then, they persisted in saying, he would want it himself.

So it was arranged, and very happy they all were. At last Sir Richard, during one of his visits to London, fell in love with Ethel, daughter of Lady Hazlewood. Captain Rudolph Culmore, rendered curious by his brother's enthusiastic de-

scription of his betrothed, went to see her, and at once became a victim to the charms of her cousin, Nest Hazlewood, an orphan whom Lady Hazlewood had adopted when the girl's parents died. Sir Richard was delighted.

There was some question just then about the captain's regiment being ordered abroad, so that, on that score, apart from other obstacles, nothing was said about his immediate marriage. But there was no obstacle to that of the heir of Brooke with Ethel Hazlewood; therefore the important ceremony took place without loss of time.

The bride was a beautiful and queenly woman, fair, graceful, and stately. She was deeply in love with her husband, who had a passionate affection for her.

The two brothers were present at the wedding; Nest Hazlewood was one of the bridemaids. The event passed off with the greatest *éclat*. The happy bride and bridegroom went off to the Continent, and returned, after six week's absence, in great state to Brooke.

Nest was persuaded to live with her cousin, and for a few months everything went merrily "as a marriage-bell." The captain heard no more of the departure of his regiment, and was continually running over to Brooke.

Captain Culmore had only his pay—he had lost his private fortune—and beautiful Nest had nothing, so that it might and probably would be years before their marriage could take place. The eldest brother, Sir Richard, made most liberal offers to Rudolph. He would have shared his income with him, but the captain would not consent. It would be an injustice to take it, he said, now that Sir Richard was married, and might have children of his own to provide for. He said that Nest and he loved each other truly, and were not afraid to wait—that he should do his best, and work hard for promotion.

The captain was passionately attached to Miss Hazlewood, but he was more philosophical than she was. He looked upon the postponement of the marriage as a necessity which there was no need to bewail, while she brooded in silence over what she considered a most cruel fate.

CHAPTER XVII.

Sir Richard and Lady Culmore had been married a little over a year when a terrible tragedy happened. Sir Richard was killed by the bursting of a gun. The bullet lodged in his heart, and he fell dead instantaneously. There was terrible consternation and distress. Messages and telegrams were despatched in haste, and before the end of the day both brothers were at the Hall. No words could tell their grief at the news.

Sir Richard had left no will; but, after a long conference with the lawyers and an interview with Lady Culmore herself, it was arranged that everything should for a time remain as it was. Lady Culmore, even in the midst of her great grief, was not altogether desolate, for in a few months she would be the mother of a little child. If this child were a boy, he would, of course, succeed both to title and estate—if a daughter, Captain Culmore would be the heir. He himself behaved most nobly. Nothing could exceed his kindness to the young widow. He insisted that she should remain at Brooke Hall, that every care and attention should be lavished on her. He went continually to visit her. He was as kind and devoted as the most loving brother could possibly have been. Nest Hazlewood remained during this anxious period with her cousin at Brooke, and she too, as nurse, was most devoted. There were times when Nest rebelled against the fate of her lover and herself.

"It does seem hard," she would say to him, "that a little child should stand between you and this grand inheritance."

But the captain would laugh at her, and never made the slightest comment on the state of affairs. His brother's wife and child were sacred to him. If he felt the slightest disappointment, he never showed it. But Nest with difficulty concealed her annoyance.

So the days and weeks passed anxiously, and at last the hour came when Lady Culmore was blessed by the birth of a son and heir. Captain Culmore had been sent for, and he

arrived an hour before the young mother died. She lived only to place the child in Rudolph's arms.

"I should like him to be called Bertie," she said; "and I intrust him to you—you and Nest."

They both knelt by her side. She took a hand of each, and held it in her own.

"No trust could be more sacred than this which I confide to you both," she said. "Take care of my little son. I leave him to you; let him be to you as a son of your own. You will look after his interests, Rudolph; it will be many a day before the broad lands of Brooke fall to him. Nest, you have been like a sister to me; take care of my child. You will be married, and you must come to live here, to be the guardians of my child."

And, kneeling there, they promised her most faithfully to care for and cherish the child as though it were their own.

I will tell the remainder of the story in Sir Rudolph's own words. He was still kneeling by the side of the bed, and his tempest of grief was over.

"Kate, you will perhaps understand me best," he said, "when I tell you that from the moment the young mother, dying, placed that child in my arms, I loved it tenderly. I am not ashamed," continued Sir Rudolph, "to tell you that I knelt down and kissed the little face of my brother's son, that I promised loyal fealty and true service to him. I promised to look after his interests as though they were my own.

"'Sir Albert Culmore of Brooke!' I said, saluting in soldier fashion the baby-heir.

"We had taken the child into the nursery which the poor young mother had prepared with such loving care. We installed the little Sir Bertie in great state. A nurse had been engaged for him. She was a tall, stout woman; and she sat before the fire with the little bundle of white flannel and white lace on her knee. Her name was Martha Jennings.

"'Do you think the little one is strong, nurse?' I asked.

"'No one can tell, sir,' she answered, 'at this age. It will be against him, poor little child, losing his mother.'

"I laid my hand upon Nest's shoulder.

"'This lady will be the most tender of mothers to him,' I said.

"But the nurse shook her head.

"'A child has but one mother, sir,' she said.

"Nest bent down to kiss him.

"'I will be a loving mother to you, baby,' she said.

"And I wondered if the mother in heaven could see the fair little child lying there, with its two protectors, Nest and myself Ah, poor Nest!'

"Lady Culmore was laid to sleep by her husband's side, and I wrote for prolonged leave of absence. If not the heir to the estate, I was the agent for it—steward for the little child and his rights. The leave of absence was granted, and I was very busy. There was much to do in settling the affairs of the estate. Ulric came down to help me whenever he could. I grew to love my fair little nephew; I used to call him the chieftain. I made it a practice to kneel by the pretty cot where he slept and pray for him. I liked to go there in the morning and at night. A tender passionate love was growing in my heart for the baby-heir, my dead brother's son. True, the little fellow had deprived me of title, estate, and wealth; but I did not seem to love him one jot the less. The nurse smiled when she saw me kneeling by the cot, kissing the little hand. I always like to remember that one day she said to me—"

"'You are a good man, sir. Excuse me, but some gentlemen would hate a child who had come between them and such a property.'"

"I laughed, for this seemed absurd and contemptible. Hate that fair, tender little creature, whose father was my own brother! Oh, no, never! Rather would I love and cherish him. One morning Nest and myself were standing by the little cot, and she said to me—"

"'What a fragile tender life it is! And to think that this is all that stands between you and fortune!'"

"I kissed her beautiful upturned face."

"'Do not encourage such thoughts, much less utter them, Nest,' I said."

"'Nevertheless it does seem strange, Rudolph,' she persisted. 'that such a tiny child should deprive you of everything.'"

"'We were all tiny children once upon a time,' I replied."

"I knew that Nest cried at times over what seemed the hardness of our fate. There was no prospect of our marriage for some time yet."

"One morning Mrs. Jennings told me that the child was not well, and a little later a letter came from headquarters, saying that our regiment was ordered abroad, though not on active service. The news was almost a death-blow to Nest. She clung to me, poor child, weeping passionately. I must not go, she said; she would die if I left her. I soothed and calmed her. I told her that, if I went, she must remain, and take good care of the little heir. I shall never forget her anguish at the thought of our separation.

"I must hasten to the end of my story. The child got worse during the day, and the next morning he was dead. The doctor said that he had died in convulsions, and added that the little one was so delicate that he had never really thought he would live. The nurse was overwhelmed with grief. It struck me afterward, although I did not think much of it at the time, that she never looked me in the face when she spoke of the child. The little heir was dead. I thanked Heaven, as I stood by the little one's side, that even in my thoughts I had never wished him harm, that I had never for one moment grudged him his rich inheritance, nor felt that he was in my way."

Sir Rudolph paused for a few moments, looking earnestly on the face of his dead wife. Then he turned to us again.

"When the child died, you remember, Ulric, I sent at once for you. I succeeded to the title and estate. I was sorry for the child; but it had been such a fragile life that I did not greatly mourn. We buried the little one. Nest then went back to her aunt, and it was arranged that she should remain with her until we were married. I did not think it strange that she should suggest taking the nurse, Martha Jennings, with her. The woman professed great attachment to her, while Nest seemed to rely greatly on her. Nor, when we were married, did I think it strange that Nest should want to bring the nurse with her to Brooke Hall. I imagined that she liked her for my little nephew's sake, and that the child formed a tie between them which women only could understand.

"The cloud caused by so many deaths hung over us for some time, and then gradually we learned to look back on the past with calmness. We were young, and I was more happy with my wife than words can tell. You know, both of you, how she loved me. I think no man in the world was ever more beloved.

"I remember that my first sensation of uneasiness arose from noticing how completely Nest was under the control of the nurse; and I did not altogether like the woman's manner to her. More than once I found my wife in tears, and when I inquired the reason she put me off with an evasive answer. Yet, Heaven knows, these were but trifles which brought me no gleam of suspicion of the reality to come.

"I wish," continued Sir Rudolph, "that I were not compelled to tell you the rest. I do so only by her command, now that she is dead. I would fain bury her secret with her, poor misguided Nest!

"I must confess now that there were times when I felt uneasy about Nest. She was so changed. She seemed to love me, if possible, more than ever. She was most devoted to me, but she puzzled me. She was abstracted, and did not seem quite sure of herself.

"About a week before Christmas-day Mrs. Jennings was taken suddenly ill. Nest seemed much distressed. We sent for the doctor from Avonsleigh, and he pronounced her to be in great danger. At first no one thought much of her illness, nor did we say anything before our friends—the house was filled with guests—lest they should be nervous. One of the housemaids undertook to nurse her, and we hoped for the best. At nine o'clock on the morning of Christmas-eve I was as happy as any one in England. I rose from the breakfast-table, after making plans for the day with my guests. Nest met me in the hall, where the men-servants had just placed a great bunch of mistletoe. I took up a spray, and held it over Nest's head. As I saw her face then I never beheld it more. I kissed the lips that had never worn anything but the sweetest smiles for me, and at the same moment the housemaid who was in attendance on the sick woman came to me.

"'Sir Rudolph,' she said, 'Mrs. Jennings bade me ask you if you would go to her. She is much worse, and she wants to see you.'

"I was on the point of saying that I would go at once, when I saw a terrible change come over my wife's face. She looked for one moment as though she was going to faint. She clasped my hand and said—

"'You must not go, Rudolph. It is only a woman's foolish fancy.'

"'I cannot refuse the poor creature. I must go, Nest,' I said.

"'You shall not!' she cried desperately; and she clung to me with such earnestness that I could hardly free myself.

"'Why do you wish me not to see her, Nest?' I asked.

"'Because she is wicked and malicious,' was the answer. 'She will tell you anything. She has mad fancies. Oh, Rudolph beloved, for Heaven's sake do not go near her!'

"There was something startling in her manner. I could not understand it. Was she afraid for herself, or for me?

"'I cannot refuse the request of a dying woman,' I said, more sternly than I had ever spoken to her before; 'but you can come with me, Nest.'

She shrank back, shuddering

"'No, no!' she cried.

"'Then let me go alone, and trust me.'

"I shall never forget the despair on her face when I left her. I shall never forget the cry that came from her lips.

"'I shall not be long, Nest,' I said.

"'I knew where the sick woman was lying, and I hastened thither. I found the nurse at the point of death. A servant was sitting with her; and the sick woman looked at me with an imploring face.

"'Send her away, Sir Rudolph,' she said. 'I want to speak to you.'

"The woman went, and we were left alone.

"'Sir Rudolph,' said the nurse, 'I know before I speak that the words I have to say will break your heart. I meant to die without uttering them, but I cannot. I dare not depart with this secret undisclosed. I—I must confess the truth.'

"'Certainly,' I said, 'If you have anything on your mind, you had better tell me.'

"'Ah, sir,' she said pityingly, 'it will break your heart! You will never be happy again—I know you so well, sir; and yet, if I die without telling you, I feel I shall never sleep in my grave. I could not rest; I should come back from the dead to tell you.'

"'Tell me now,' I said, for her words had excited in me a certain horror that I could not endure—'tell me at once!'

"She beckoned to me to go closer to her, and I did so. She raised her hand, and I placed my ear to her lips.

"'I dare not speak aloud,' she said. 'Even the walls have ears, and they might hear me. What I have to say is a fatal secret that you must tell to no one. Another life hangs on it. Sir Rudolph, your wife, Lady Culmore, poisoned the little baby heir herself.'

"I started back from her with a feeling of loathing and horror impossible to describe. My fair gentle Nest slay that little tender babe! I was filled with anger.

"'You are raving!' I cried. 'It is mad, wicked fancy!'

"'Sir,' she said calmly, 'it is the truth—the plain simple truth; and I can die easily now that I have told it. Sir, as surely as Heaven is above us, Lady Culmore killed the child. I saw her do it with my own eyes. I will tell you; you shall judge for yourself.'

"There was no help for it. I was compelled to listen, and I had begun to fear—ah me, how terribly!

"'You remember,' she said, 'that the baby was taken ill, and that we nursed him assiduously, no one more tenderly, more kindly than Miss Nest. The night he died we were rather anxious about him, and Miss Hazlewood said she would sit by his cot while I went down to supper. I was quite willing. I went to see if the child was all right. He was fast asleep, and looked, to my thinking, better; there was more color in the fair little face. As I left the room, Sir Rudolph, I was struck by the peculiar expression on Miss Hazlewood's face. I could not describe it—a cruel look it seemed to me. I went down stairs, but Miss Hazlewood's look haunted me. Not that I had any fear; I would rather have suspected a saint of doing harm to the child than Miss Hazlewood. I could not rest down stairs. I went back. I saw Miss Hazlewood on her knees by the side of the cradle. She held a little bottle in one hand and a spoon in the other. As I walked in at the door, I saw her, with a steady hand, drop two drops from the bottle into the spoon. Then, before I could cross the room, before I had time to speak, the child had swallowed the contents of the teaspoon. I caught her, as I may say, red-handed. She neither saw nor heard me, she was so deeply engrossed in giving the child the fatal dose. I sprang forward.

"'"What are you doing?" I cried.

"'For a moment she seemed almost paralyzed with fear.

"'"What are you doing?" I cried again, almost beside myself.

"'"Giving baby his medicine," she said. "It is just time."

"'She tried to hide the bottle; but I would not let her, and in the struggle she dropped it. The contents were spilled upon the pillow. I picked up the bottle. On it was a label with the one terrible word—"Poison."

"'"You have dropped some of this into the teaspoon!" I cried. "You guilty miserable woman, you have killed the child!"

"'She did not deny it. She fell at my feet, groveling, crying out that it was such a fragile little life, and that it parted you from her. She clung to me with cries and tears. She told me that your regiment was ordered abroad, and that it would be years before you could return and marry her—long years—but that, if the child died, and you succeeded to the baronetcy, you would be obliged to sell, and then you would marry her at once. "And I loved him so," she cried plaintively; "I love him so dearly!" That was all she kept repeating—"I love him so!" It was a terrible scene, sir—the child already dead in his cot, and the beautiful lady, with her white despairing face, crouching on the ground.

"'"I could not let him go!" she moaned. "He has been so faithful, so loyal, so good; he has loved me so well. Every one else's love prospers. Why should we spend all the best years of our life apart? He might die abroad, he whom I love with all my heart. And it was only this one little life, so fragile, so weak, that stood between him and wealth."

"'She bent over the little one's body.

"'"See," she cried; "it has not suffered; it breathed only for a short space, and then died. A few minutes ago it was a weak, struggling little creature, now it is a bright angel in heaven. I have done no serious wrong. I have set the little soul free, and I need not part from my love. I have given him fortune, wealth, all that my heart desired for him,"

"'"The law will tell a different story, Miss Hazelwood," I said. "In the eyes of the law, as well as before Heaven, the life of a little child is as sacred as that of a grown-up person."

"'Do you know, Sir Rudolph,' said the nurse, 'I do not think that up to that time she had looked upon the deed as murder? She had thought only of removing the obstacle

that lay between you, sir, and wealth—that lay between herself and her love. She had never thought of the fact that she had put herself within the power of the law. If you had but seen her when I told her that she had committed a murder and deserved to be hanged! To prove the truth of all I say, sir, look at this. I have saved it from that time to this.'

"She drew from beneath her pillow a little bottle, with the word 'Poison' on the label of it, and a frilled white linen pillow-case in which holes had been burned.

"'You can tell how deadly the poison was when you see that it has burned the linen in this fashion,' said the nurse. 'But the child did not suffer one minute; it died at once. Well, sir, Miss Hazelwood cried, wept, prayed, pleaded, until at last I promised not to tell her secret. But I cannot keep it in death."

"'How am I to know this story is true?' I asked. 'These things you show me are no proof.'

"'A soul on the brink of eternity does not lie, sir. Lady Culmore paid me well to keep the secret, but I have very often been on the point of telling you.'

"'I do not believe you even now,' I cried.

"'Look behind you, sir,' she said; 'you will read the truth there."

"I glanced in the direction in which she pointed, and there I saw my wife standing with ghastly terror on her face and desperate fear in her eyes. I held up the bottle to her.

"'Is it true?' I asked.

"And she fell upon her knees, cowering as she cried out—

"'Yes, it is true!'

"I cannot describe," continued Sir Rudolph, "my feelings of horror. Since the shock I have never been the same man. An hour later, I stood with my unfortunate wife in her boudoir, resolved that we should part that hour, never to meet again. I loved her very dearly; but, when I knew that she had taken the life of that fair little child, loathing took the place of love.

"I told her, in grave measured words, that we must part that night, never more to meet. I told her that the struggle in my heart was a hard one, that I felt inclined to deliver her up to justice and to the fate she deserved. But she was a woman, and my wife—I could not see her hanged. I hesitated, as it seemed to me, between two sins—screening a mur-

deress, and giving up to justice the wife who had sinned for me.

"If I talked to you forever, Ulric, Kate, I could not tell you all the details of that horrible scene. Poor beautiful Nest! Her grief was terrible to witness. She clung to me, she knelt at my feet, she prayed and pleaded with such passionate despair that it might almost have moved a heart of stone. What she had done had been done for love of me. What did that little fragile life matter? What was it in comparison with my fortune, with my love and hers? I saw that what the old nurse had said was true—she did not regard the deed she had committed as murder.

"Ah, you cannot tell what it was to me to have the woman I had loved best in the world crouching in tears at my feet! This woman, weeping, praying was my darling Nest; the face I had loved, the white hand I had kissed and caressed, were those of a murderess, and that murderess was my wife! Hour after hour passed on that terrible Christmas-eve. We were still together, and I was unable to decide what to do. I could not give her up to justice. She was my wife, and she had sinned for me; yet the murder was none the less a terrible one. No man was ever more wretched or more bewildered. Poor Nest, how she loved me! She crouched at my feet in an agony of tears, and I could not raise her to comfort her—I could not soothe her. She was worn and exhausted with the passion of her grief.

"'Do not send me from you, love!" she cried, in a voice like that of a dying woman. 'Kill me, if you will. I should bless even death at your hands.'

"What was I to do? She had committed a cruel crime; she deserved punishment; yet, as she clung to my feet in tears, how could I decide?

"'It was all for you, love,' she moaned. 'I could not bear that you should go across the sea. I have loved you so dearly and so long, it seemed as though we should never be happy.

"'Happy! As though sin could ever lead to happiness!'

"'I would have killed myself, Rudolph,' she said, 'to make you happy.'

"And I knew it was true. I could not give her up to justice, and I certainly could not take her to my heart again, although she had sinned for me.

"We had been three hours together, when a sudden idea occurred to me. We could he husband and wife no more. I could never kiss the face of a murderess; I could never touch the hands that had taken the life of that fair little child. All was over between my once beloved Nest and me—over forever. But I could shield her in some measure. She should never, if I could help it, mix with the world again. The idea occurred to me to bring her to Ullamere—no place could be more out of the world—and to live out here the remainder of our sorrowful lives apart. I would keep her secret on those conditions. She must be content to live alone without friends or visitors.

"For myself, so hot was my indignation that I swore I would never touch her hands again; and she promised that she would never even lay a finger on me. Poor Nest! She broke that promise only once. We were to live together—that is, under one roof—but were to be further apart than strangers; more than the bitterness of death lay between us. She was never to approach my rooms, nor I hers. We were to speak only when necessity compelled us. So I hoped to compromise matters, to punish her for her sin and in some measure to shield her from the consequences. Yet I felt that I had made a most miserable compromise.

"I remember that she looked at me, hopeless despair shining in her eyes.

"'Rudolph,' she said, 'the sentence you have passed is heavier than the sentence of death; but I accept it, and submit to it, coming from you.'

"Then came two or three days that I shall never forget, the abrupt breaking up the party of friends, the surprise of the servants. Some of them I left in charge of Brooke; the two most faithful I brought here. I left orders for the funeral of the old nurse, who died a few hours after she had confessed that miserable secret to me—and then we came here.

"Here we have lived since in the very depths of misery. I adhered strictly to the rules laid down. I could not forgive my wife her crime, although I knew it had been committed from love of me. Every day it grew more horrible in my eyes, and every day the distance between us increased. Every time I saw those hands of hers I fancied them holding the fatal dose, until I—oh, may Heaven forgive me!—until

I hated her. I never looked at her, I never heard the sound of her voice, without thinking of the murdered child.

"After that I noticed a great change in her. I do not think, frankly speaking, that she ever realized the enormity of her sin. I believe there had always been a faint hope in her heart that I should forgive her and take her back again, poor child! The stories that I heard from the servants about her were so deplorable that I decided on finding a companion for her. Kate, who came as poor Nest's companion, will be your wife, Ulric; and may Heaven send you a happier lot than has fallen to me!

"She sinned, but she suffered; through all the time of bitter estrangement she loved me as well and as passionately as ever. She tried to atone for her sin. How she pleaded to me that she might nurse the rector's child!

"That is her story. How do you judge her?"

Closed forever were the lips that might have pleaded in self-defence, the eyes that had shed so many bitter tears. She could tell us nothing of the passion and love that had driven her mad, of her sorrow and despair, her torture and anguish. She lay silent. Heaven would judge her. Dare we?

Rudolph bent down and kissed her with burning tears.

"Who will judge her?" he asked.

And no voice replied.

"What flowers will you place in her hands, Kate?" said Ulric softly.

Ah me, not the white roses of innocence or the red blossoms of guilt! In her golden hair, on her silent heart, in her white hands, I placed purple passion-flowers. the truest emblem of her.

* * * * * * *

I am Lady Culmore now, for Sir Rudolph went back into the Army, and was slain at Isandula. Then Ulric gave up the Bar, and we were married, and went to live at Brooke. The memory of the fair little child, of its young mother, of beautiful Nest, has faded now; but Ulric, more my lover than ever since he has been my husband, says that, when he sees the mistletoe, the white berries look like tears upon it; and he will not have it near us at Christmas-time.

[Braime, Charlotte Mary

[1885?]

FAIR BUT FALSE.

CHAPTER I.

MINE—all mine! Mine the grand sweep of meadow-land, green and fertile, looking like a sea of gold when the wind stirred the yellow buttercups! Mine the range of purple-tinted hills that lay in the distance, clothed with trees which had been the growth of centuries! Mine the pine-forest stretching down to the sea, with its rich aromatic odors, and its never-ceasing music as the wind swayed the heads of the stately pines! Mine the shady woods with their open glades, their leafy cloisters, where the sunlight fell on the sward, filtered, as it were, through the boughs of the interlacing trees, where the wild-flowers grew in lavish abundance—a lovely verdant kingdom wherein the merry brown hares roamed at will and the bright-eyed squirrels leaped fearlessly from bough to bough! Mine the magnificent gardens, said to be the finest, the most extensive, and the best laid out in the country, with their wealth of ferneries, and greenhouses, fountains and statuary! Mine the fine trout-stream that ran through the wide domain! Mine the numberless little brooks that meandered along peacefully and found their way to the river Floy, and were then swept on to mingle their waters with the ever-restless ocean! Mine the grand old mansion called Jesmond Hall, one of the most ancient and picturesque houses in the country, a stately pile of gray stone standing on the slope of a hill! Originally it had been a castle, held by one of the early Saxon chiefs. It had

changed hands many times, and had been added to, taken from and altered until it became what it now was, a confusion of architectural styles, in which the original was almost obliterated by the later additions; yet withal was it a most picturesque home. Terraces and gardens had a gentle slope, and the deep swift river Floy ran at the foot of the hill; and in the distance there was a glimpse of the blue waters of the sea—for Jesmond stood on the fair coast of Hampshire. Mine the fine old ruins, with their ivy-clad walls and well preserved keep! Mine all the wealth that had been hoarded in hidden coffers, the countless thousands that had been accumulating for long years! Mine the diamonds and rare jewels—Jesmond heirlooms! Mine the pictures—literally worth a king's ransom—the fine old silver, the treasures of gold, of rare old china, of buhl, of jasper, and of marqueterie—all that the old Hall contained was mine—all mine!

As I, Felicia Gordon, stood on the summit of the steep grassy hill everything on which I gazed was my own, except the vast expanse of sea which bounded my estate on the south.

I was not vain; but, looking back, I should imagine that my heart swelled at that moment with a sense of my own importance. On this large domain there were many tenants. Pretty little farms nestled in the valleys, quaint old-fashioned homesteads dotted the meadows, the straggling little village of Mead was all mine, and I owned many houses in the town that lay nearest to the Hall—Honton; so that numbers of men women, and children were dependant on me, many lives lay, as it were in, my hand; and on this bright May morning, when I stood on the hill top, looking over my miniature kingdom, my heart and mind were full of good resolutions.

This splendid fortune which had come so unexpectedly to me should not be spent on myself in lavish luxury, in gayeties, frivolites, or senseless extravagance. That I seriously resolved. Heaven had given it to me, and I would do good with it and use it wisely. There should be no bitter abject poverty, no sickness should go unrelieved, there should be no want of education on my fair estate of Jesmond. I would be queen and mother to my people. My heart warmed to them, yearned over them, as I stood and contemplated how boundless Dame Nature had dealt with the fruitful lands before me. No motherless children should weep on these fertile lands. My first undertaking would be an orphanage, to be built down

by the sea, yet so near Jesmond that I could visit it every day. No old men or old women should live half starving and die forlorn within the limits of my domain, for I should have almshouses that should yet be comfortable homes. The sick should not lie neglected and helpless in the cottages that were mine, for I would build a large hospital near the village of Mead, where the air was clear and bracing. The children should have their schools and playgrounds, and education should be free to all. I would be queen and mother in a true and real sense to those whom heaven had in a measure confided to my charge. My heart and soul were fired with these resolves.

The blue heavens shone above me; the yielding earth laughed beneath my feet; the air was full of luscious odors of May, the scent from the pine-forest, the brine from the sea, and nearer to me came heavily-laden gusts of perfume from lilac and magnolia blossom. I shall never forget the moment when, standing on the green hill-top, the shining, shimmering sea in the distance, I registered my vow to live for others and not for myself alone.

The will which gave me all this wealth was indisputably clear and simple, and had in it no flaw. My uncle Sir William Jesmond had but one son, Paul, who was his natural heir and successor.

The Jesmonds of Jesmond Dene were a very old family, but at the time when my story begins their number had greatly decreased. They had died away—fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers—until there was no one left of a once numerous race except Sir William, the owner and lord of Jesmond Dene, and his sister, my mother, Teresa Jesmond.

Sir William was at heart a miser. He loved money for its own sake, and the sight of it never failed to bring a smile to his hard mean face. Although my mother was his own and only sister, when she married he gave her no dowry, but very unwillingly made her a present of a few hundred pounds, with an intimation that she must ask for no more. She never did; but in those days, when she deplored my uncle's meanness, she never thought that all his gold was accumulating for me.

My mother had married a clergyman, the Rev. Arthur Gordon, and I was their only child. They both died when I

was a girl of thirteen, and my father's sister, Annette Gordon, took charge of me.

Sir William Jesmond was married, and a son and heir had been born unto him; but in his lifetime the home at Jesmond Dene was not a happy one. I went there once. Lady Jesmond had asked aunt Annette to bring me for the summer holidays, and I well remember the magnificent old house with its treasures, the gardens and grounds, the woods and the sea. I remember Sir William, a tall spare man with a mean face and small cunning eyes; I vividly recollect Lady Jesmond, a faded elegant woman, who seemed to me to be tired of life; but I remember best of all my handsome bright faced cousin Paul. I was thirteen years of age then, he five years older. He was very kind to me, and I loved him with all the ardor of a childish love. He was a young prince and a veritable hero in my eyes.

"Cheer up, Felicia!" he would say to me twenty times a day. "I am going out to see the world, and, when I have seen it, I shall come home and marry you."

"But Sir William will never give us any money," I would remark ,with a keen conviction that nothing could be done without it.

"I will make plenty of money, dear. My father may keep his," he would answer cheerfully.

And, of all the memories of my girlhood, that of my handsome, generous, laughter-loving cousin stands out the brightest and the best. How little I dreamed in those days that I should ever take his place!

My life was spent quietly enough with my aunt Annette. She had a small annuity, out of which she fed, clothed, and educated me, for I had not in the wide world one shilling of my own.

It may be imagined therefore what a change it was for me—a penniless orphan—when I became sole heiress of Sir William Jesmond of Jesmond Dean, his land, shares, untold gold, all mine.

Lady Jesmond died when her son was nineteen, and after her death Sir William became, if possible, a greater miser than ever, and almost refused himself the necessaries of life. None but the old servants bound by strong ties to the family would tolerate his meanness; even his son Paul could not endure it. He wanted to see the world, as he had

always desired, and, after many disputes and arguments, Sir William purchased for him a commission in the —th Hussars. Three months after he joined the regiment it was ordered off to India, and Paul thankfully embraced the opportunity of getting away from the paternal roof and "seeing the world" at the same time. Five years passed, and there was little communication between father and son. Sir William's was a wretched, miserable life, and it ended as miserably as it had been spent. He was found dead in his chair, holding in his hand a letter written by Colonel Brownlow, of the —th Hussars, telling him that his son Captain Paul Jesmond had died suddenly of a malignant fever without having had time to write him one word of farewell.

The old baronet had never seemed to care much for either his wife or child, but that letter killed him. He had given his life, his heart, his soul, to gold—he had worshiped his accumulated wealth to the exclusion of everything else in life; yet he could not live on, knowing that his handsome, careless, generous son had been snatched away in the bloom of early manhood, and he—his father—denied the consolation of one parting word or one last look at the face he loved.

Sir William was buried in due course; and, when his will was read, it was made clear that I, Felicia Gordon, was sole heiress of all his wealth. The terms of his will were simple enough. He left everything he held in the world—land, house, money, scrip, and shares—to his son Paul Jesmond. If his son married and had issue, the property was to descend intact to his eldest son. If Paul Jesmond died unmarried, it was to go without reserve to his niece Felicia Gordon, the only child of Teresa Gordon, his sister. It was to descend to her children if she married; if she did not, it passed to some distant relatives to whom Sir William had always entertained a strong antipathy. That I was the next of kin there was no doubt. Sir William was dead, Paul was dead; Jesmond Dean, with its rich revenues, was mine.

It was early in February when I came with aunt Annette to take possession of my new home, and it was the beginning of May when I made my resolve to live for others and not for myself.

I had been at Jesmond Dene about three months, and had grown to love the place and the people. I had just begun

to put my philanthropic resolutions into shape, and my buildings were slowly rising beneath the hands of the many workmen engaged. The grand old mansion had been renovated—some of Sir William's hoarded thousands had been spent upon it—and the grounds and garden had been rescued from the weeds and long-standing neglect. I had increased my staff of servants—indeed everything was in the very perfection of order—and I was undoubtedly happy. I was to be happier still, although the full light of the sun was hidden from me for the present.

CHAPTER II.

A SMILE came over the kindly face of my aunt Annette when I told her of my resolves.

"Mother and queen!" she repeated. "I wish you health, strength, and wisdom to keep to them."

The May sun never shown on a brighter fate than mine, or on a lighter heart. It was true the shadow of death lay over my new inheritance; but then I had seen my uncle only once, and that some years before. For the bright-faced handsome cousin dead in a far-off land I had the deepest pity, and one of my first acts was to erect to his memory a beautiful marble cross—and that memorial was always surrounded by fragrant flowers.

"All the novelty of my position had died away when the month of May came round. I might have been Miss Gordon of Jesmond Dene all my life, everything came so naturally to me. The tenants liked and trusted me, the servants showed me absolute devotion, my buildings were all in progress, my aunt and I were happy beyond words in the grand old mansion. Our neighbors had called upon us, but it was too soon after Sir William's death for us to receive or pay visits. We were happy enough without that—indeed the hours of the day were not sufficiently long for all the pleasant occupations we found to engage us. Aunt Annette was as young at heart as I was myself, and, when the moon was silvering the ripples of the sea, it was no unusual thing for us to wan-

der down to the shore and gaze in rapturous awe and delight at the majestic scene before us.

I was nearly twenty when this great change of fortune came to me, but still a girl in lightness of heart, in want of knowledge of the world and its ways—a girl with all a girl's innocent love of fun and frolic. I had had no lover; my heart was fresh and untouched.

It is a hard thing for a girl to tell her own love-story as I have to tell mine—to tell of the dream that came to me before I knew that my fair inheritance was to be the scene of a tragedy—to disclose the beautiful love-dream that came to me as the revelation of a newer, brighter, higher life than any I had yet known.

In the same green county, on the shore of the same shining sea, stood an old mansion called Dunroon. It was larger than Jesmond Dene, though not quite so picturesque; still there were not many finer old places than Dunroon. The great feature of it was the river Doon, which ran through the grounds. From the hill-top I could see the tall towers and turrets of Dunroon, the ancestral home of the Saxons.

When we had been some time at Jesmond Dene, Lady Saxon called upon us, and was pleased from the first moment she saw me to take great interest in me.

"The Jesmonds and the Saxons have been friends for many generations," she said: "they have loved and intermarried. It seems strange that you and I—you a young woman and I an old one—should be the sole representatives of two such ancient families."

"But you have a son," I remarked—for I had heard much of Lord Saxon.

"I do not mean that," she interrupted hastily. "Of course my son is the representative of the Saxons. What I intended to say was that it seems strange we should both have the care of house and estate. My son is always in Italy, and I do not know when he will return." Here she looked at me with sudden emotion in her face. "My son is more than the whole world to me," she went on. "He is the very core of my heart, the very light of my eyes. The world is all shadow to me, but he stands out clear and distinct. It is the great pain of my life that he lives away from me, that he seems to love art better than nature, Italy better than England. I cannot understand it; but it is so."

Lady Saxon was still a handsome well-preserved woman, with a penchant for rich dresses and costly furs, diamonds and priceless lace. I had heard others say that her son was "art-mad." He had now been five years from home, during which time his mother had lived at Dunroon, and had managed everything for him. Indeed it was often said that but for his mother's continual mention of him Lord Saxon would have been forgotten on his own estate. My aunt and I both liked Lady Saxon, and I often listened patiently by the hour while she expatiated upon the virtues of her darling son. He was the handsomest, the dearest, the best. There was no face, no voice like his. The only flaw in his otherwise perfect character was that he would loiter in Italy instead of coming home.

"Have you ever dreamed how beautiful a man's face can be?" she asked me. "Imagine one that is dark, proud, tender, and imperious, drawing the hearts of all women who look upon it—a face that seems always raised to the skies and hardly to see the lowly earth. That is my son. He is like that. I have seen women watch for the gleam of his eyes, for his smiles, for the words from his lips; but he did not see them. He sees the stars that illumine the skies, but he does not see the daisies that grow in the fields. When you come to Dunroon, I will show you his portrait, and when you see his face you will understand better."

So it happened that I thought a great deal and formed a very high opinion of Lord Saxon because his mother talked to me incessantly and almost always in praise of him.

"If he were but more like other men," she would say, with a sigh, "if he had ambition, I should not care at what he aimed. He thinks more of a broken statue than a seat in Parliament. An old picture has a greater charm for him than any worldly honors. Music, painting, and sculpture are the three things that he loves best? and he is an English nobleman, master of a large estate, and head of a grand old race!"

I ventured to suggest that all noblemen need not have the same tastes; but she was dissatisfied because her son frittered away his time and his opportunities upon art instead of cultivating the ordinary life of an English nobleman.

"My husband," she said, "was a stanch Conservative, yet I do not believe that my son knows the difference between a

Whig and a Tory. My husband never allowed one foot of timber to be cut down on his estate; my son writes always about the preservation of pictures. But he is so good that I ought to be ashamed to grumble at his one great failing."

"My son is a dreamer of dreams," she told me one morning, when she had driven over to Jesmond Dene. "He is led astray by a passionate love of beauty. He detects loveliness where others see none. The curve of an arm, the graceful arch of a neck, the beauty of a dark straight brow, delight him. He is, in fact, one of those people, half artist, half genius, who can 'hear a leaf fall.' Do you know all that that phrase means?"

"I can imagine it," I replied.

"My son has a theory that the world can be set straight by a right understanding of beauty, and by a proper cultivation of it He is a dreamer in a world of stern reality, and some day or other I am sorely afraid his dreams will bring him bitter sorrow. If he would but marry!"

"That would perhaps cure him of dreaming," I said laughingly.

After that we paid a visit to Dunroon. While aunt Annette talked to some visitors, Lady Saxon, addressing me in a low voice said—

"Come with me to my boudoir. My son's portrait hangs there, and I want you to see it."

I went with her. There was a strange wild beating at my heart, a strange sense of something unusual. I felt more as though I were going to see a living person than a picture.

The boudoir was an elegant room facing the west; a soft light fell on the picture of the master of Dunroon, Lord Saxon.

We stood silent before it. She did not even turn to me and say, "That is my son." Looking at the portrait, I seemed to know by instinct why he could not help his love of beauty, and why women loved him as they looked upon him. It was a handsome, even fascinating face. The kingly poise of the head, the well-chiseled features, the dark straight brows, the keen dark eyes that seemed full of pride and passion—eyes that had in them the power of controling others—the shapely mouth, combining the firmness of a man with the tenderness of a woman—the face altogether was one that seen either in a picture or in real life must haunt you forever. The eyes

looked into mine as I stood silently marveling at the beauty portrayed on the canvas.

"That is my son," said Lady Saxon, after we had gazed for some time upon the strangely fascinating picture.

Why did I stand there with fast-beating heart and flushed face? Why did my hands tremble? Why did those dark tender eyes flash into mine as it were? I turned to her ladyship.

"What is your son's name?" I asked.

"Lionel," she answered, smiling; "but at home he was always called 'Nello.'"

Again I lapsed into silence.

"His face is full of power," said his mother proudly.

"Yes," I answered, with unconscious prophecy; "but the power is latent. It will not develop yet. He must dream out his dreams, and then—"

"Ah, then?" his mother echoed with a sigh.

I had seen no face like the one before me. I had not believed that Nature was so lavish in the bestowal of her riches upon mortal man. I went home haunted by Lord Saxon's portrait. If I looked at the western sky where the great rosy clouds were gathering, it was there; if I looked along the serried rows of dark pine trees, it was there; when the moon shone out at night, and I walked down to see it glittering on the sea, the face was there. It came to me in the starlight, in my dreams, in the rays of the sun. I saw it in the chalice of the white lilies, and in the hearts of the red roses.

"I am haunted," I said to myself. And even as the face seemed to be photographed on my brain, so the name rang like music in my ears, "Nello, Nello!" The birds sung it, the wind whispered it, and I laughed at my strange fancies.

CHAPTER III.

So little did I realize or understand this new sensation which possessed my whole being that I laughed again when Lady Saxon drove over to the hall and we spent two long hours in discussing her son.

"I like to speak to you about Nello," she said, "you seem to understand him. I know that talking about him so frequently is a weakness of mine, and at times I see a half-satirical smile on the faces of many of my listeners; but you never smile and never tire—you understand."

So, from the day on which we stood side by side before his portrait, the young lord seemed to form a tie between the mother and myself.

Aunt Annette was much amused at the ardent friendship which Lady Saxon had evinced for me.

"If you were Lady Saxon's own daughter, she could not care more for you," she would say to me.

Why did those simple words, so carelessly uttered, touch my very heart? Of course he would come home some day, and I should see him; and he would talk to me, this dreamer of dreams, because his mother loved me. Then my thoughts would become confused and my heart beat more quickly than ever.

One morning Lady Saxon drove over with a bundle of letters from her son to read to me. They were dated from different places, and in several of them he spoke of coming home; but no definite time was mentioned.

"He may come at any time now," said Lady Saxon—"at any hour. If Heaven will but give me my son once again, he shall not leave me. I wish he would marry."

As she spoke she fixed her eyes on my face, and my instinct told me that in her heart she added, "I wish he would marry you;" and that look in her eyes was often there when she spoke to me of Lord Saxon.

It was early in June and the world seemed a paradise of beauty, fragrance, and song; the great magnolia trees on the lawn were all in bloom, and the light breeze wafted the perfume of myriads of flowers. I had some fine white jasmine that was in the full perfection of beauty, and, as Lady Saxon was very fond of it, I resolved to drive over and take her some. The birds were trilling their tuneful lays, the banks and hedges were resplendent with clusters of wild-flowers, whilst the wind played musically as it rustled gently among the leaves of the lime-trees. All nature appeared in its brightest garb and its gayest mood. To my girlish fancy, excited by always hearing of the young lord, the birds sung "Nello" in their shrill sweet voices, and the wind whispered

"Nello" to the green lime-leaves that had on them a half golden glow.

I drove through the wealth of rich summer foliage and flowers, always keeping to view the murmuring sea, as it rolled lazily in the golden sunlight, until I came to Dunroon's stately mansion.

A groom came out and relieved me of the high-spirited ponies.

"Her ladyship is in the garden, Miss Gordon," he said, knowing that I always made my way straight to her wherever she was.

Yes; her ladyship was in the garden, her hands full of crimson roses, and a light on her pleasant face such as I had never seen before.

"Félice," she cried, when she saw me—she always used the French form of my name—"Félice, what good angel has brought you here?"

"I came to bring you this," I answered, holding out the white odorous jasmine. "Let me twine it with your roses," I said; and, lo, she was looking at me with tears in her eyes!

"This is not the only welcome gift that has come to me to-day," she murmured to herself. "Come with me, Félice; I have something to show you," she said; and I followed her, my hands filled to overflowing with the fragrant flowers.

She led the way to a pretty little drawing-room, called Sea View room, from the fact that a magnificent view of the sea, of the stretch of yellow sands, and of the blue waters that came rolling in, breaking into sheets of white foam, could be obtained from the long wide windows. She entered the room quietly, and I followed. By the open window, intently watching the inrolling of the waves, stood a tall young man, and when he turned at the sound of our entrance, I saw the face of Lord Saxon—"Nello," as the birds, the leaves, the wind sung it; "Nello," as the word fell like two notes of liquid music from his mother's lips; but Lord Saxon to me. As she had taken me to see his portrait, so she now brought me to see him in person. She led me to him.

"Nello," she said, "this is my new neighbor Miss Felicia Gordon, the 'Félice' of whom I have written so often. Though I am an old lady and she a young one, we are very fast friends."

"My mother's friends are always mine," he said, holding out his hand to me in the most cordial manner.

I wish I could describe what I then felt. In our lives there are moments so full of emotion that they seem to mark a turn in them that we never reach again.

This was such a moment for me. I could not describe it. At first I felt almost a shock, as though the picture had suddenly come to life and the dark tender eyes were again smiling down into mine. Then I saw the dancing waves crest-tipped by the powerful rays of the summer sun, I saw the bouquet of fragrant flowers that I held in my hands. Ah, me, to this day the sight and the scent of those flowers vividly bring back the past to me! When I look at them, Swinburne's line comes home to me with singular force—

"I shall never again be friends with roses."

And then I raised my eyes and looked at the original of the picture that had so strangely fascinated me. It was as though I had raised them to the warm noonday sun, as though a thrill of fever passed through my veins; my heart beat violently, my face flushed, some of the flowers fell unheeded to the ground. I remembered what his mother had said, that all women who looked into his face loved him. Did I? The very thought made me tremble; but it was not with fear. He was speaking to me, of what I hardly know, for in the spell his presence cast over me, I saw nothing but the surpassing loveliness of his marvelous face. All the attributes of a noble character were delineated in it, and it had an indefinable something which, without my knowing it, drew my heart from my breast and kept it.

"What a glorious bouquet you have," he was saying; "and how beautiful they are! I did not know that red roses and white jasmine went so well together."

"That is Félice's taste," said Lady Saxon; "and it is perfect."

"It is like herself," he remarked, with a glance of unmistakable admiration.

Ten minutes later I was sitting on the couch by the great window. Lady Saxon had taken off my hat and mantle, her son had relieved me of my burden of flowers, and I was at

home with them—happy, light of heart, but with a strange sensation of almost terrified delight, something quite new to me. I could not tell which was the greater, the pleasure or the pain of it. I did not often look at him; but my ears drank in every word that he uttered. I had never before known the charm of a good talker, and to me the flow of his words was like listening to a strain of sweet music. He had a low, clear, cheery voice, and a laugh that it did one good to hear. Looking back on that day, I blame myself. No girl ought to give her love unasked. It is unmaidenly, undignified; but it was more Lady Saxon's fault than mine. She had sown the seed, and I was to reap the harvest.

Lady Saxon begged me to stay for the day, and, assuming that she had my consent, ordered the carriage to fetch aunt Annette. It was a day of days! I could no more describe it than I could paint the rose, the gold, and the purple that flush the morning sky. It was the day on which my soul woke to maturity; and the dawning of that new life was terrible even in its beauty. It was brightest sun and deepest shadow—sun when the light of his face was turned upon me, when he spoke to me, when he showed me any gracious little act of attention; shade when he was absent or engrossed with another.

We were out on the lawn under the white magnolia-tree, and he was talking to me of the power of its perfume. When we came to the sweet syringa-trees, he told me a legend of one of his ancestresses, who broke off a spray to give to her lover when he was going to the wars, and it was returned to her dyed with his heart's blood.

"It was taken from this very tree," he said.

After dinner, when we were out under the cypress, Lord Saxon told me how often his mother had written about me, and how well he knew the name of Felicia Gordon.

"There was one surprise in store for me," he said with a smile. "I thought you were a staid matronly lady, and I found you a young girl. I was astonished when I saw your face behind that great mass of flowers."

I longed with all my passionate young heart to ask him if he had found my face fair, if it had pleased him. But no—he must never know that his mother had made me love him before he returned home. And as we stood under the

dark boughs of the cypress, watching the sun set over the river and the pine-woods, these words came into my mind—

"My mother, list'ning to my sleep,
Heard nothing but a sigh at night—
The short sigh rippling on the deep,
When hearts run out of breath and sight
Of men to God's clear sight.

"When others named thee, thought thy brows
Were straight and tender—'Here
He comes between the vineyard rows!'
I said not 'Ay,' nor waited, dear,
To feel thy step too near."

I would be like the girl in the song, I determined. No one should know, no one should even guess my secret; no one should read it in my face, or hear it in my voice, or see it shining in my eyes. It never need be, never should be known. I could and would guard my secret.

At last this day of supreme happiness came to an end. There could be no other like it, just as there could be no second sunrise, no second birth of the lily and the rose. It was the first dawn of love, delicious yet bewildering.

I drove home with Aunt Annette under the light of the stars, but I did not see them. When I raised my face to the heavens, I saw only the face of Nello, Lord Saxon.

CHAPTER IV.

"Do you like my son, Félice?" asked Lady Saxon, some days afterward. "Is he what you expected to find him? Did I describe him well?"

I did not dare to look straight at her when I answered the question; but I saw a smile on her lips.

He had been home a fortnight then, and I had forgotten what life had been like before he came to Dunroon. The past and the future held no charm for me. I had no thought but for the present, with its unalloyed happiness, its ravishing delight.

We never tired of each other, for we had, after all, many ideas and tastes in common. He was an excellent talker, I

a good listener. No one seemed to think it strange thatwe passed long hours together. Lady Saxon made no comment, my aunt no remark. Few days passed without an invitation to Dunroon; and if we did not accept it, Lord Saxon would come to Jesmond Dene. And every morning the delight, the novelty, with its mixture of passionate happiness and transient pain, grew stronger upon me. He was a dreamer of dreams, a lover of beauty, poet and artist in one. But to my thinking, there was no one else in the world like him—he stood alone.

He never even hinted at love; yet he was always kind, gentle, and attentive; and I felt sure that he admired me, for he had made many sketches of me. I flattered myself that my love for him was carefully concealed, that no one knew of it, that it was hidden in the innermost recess of my heart.

"Nothing is better, I well think,
Than love; the hidden well-water
Is not so delicate to drink."

I felt sure that he was growing to love me, for there was between us an intangible something denoting a stronger feeling than friendship. When he spoke to me, his voice had a low and tender tone; when he looked at me, his eyes shone with evident admiration. I had a sure conviction that he thought of me, remembered my words, studied to please me —and was not that growing love?

One evening we stood together by a picturesque acacia, and, carelessly gathering a spray of it, I held it out to him.

"There are not many fairer flowers," I said; and, as he took it from me, he kissed my hand.

On another occasion we were standing in the library, both searching for a book, which he found; and, as he stooped to give it to me, he touched my brow with his lips. In that moment all the brightness and sweetness of heaven seemed to be showered upon me! He was learning to love me! And he kissed me again in the woods, when we wandered thither to listen to the nightingales. And, as we strolled on in the silvery moonlight which pierced the leafy canopy above us, with only the musical trill of the birds breaking the silence, I thought how applicable these lines were to me—

"First time he kissed me, he but only kissed
The fingers of this hand with which I write;

And ever since it grew more clear and bright,
Slow to world greetings, quick with its 'Oh, list!'
When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst
I could not wear here plainer to my sight
Than that first kiss. The second passed in height
The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,
Half falling on the hair. Oh, beyond meed
That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown
With sanctifying sweetness did precede!
The the third upon my lips was folded down,
Two perfect purple states, since when ended
I have been proud, and said, 'My love, my own!'"

In all England there was no place so famous for nightingales as Jesmond Dene. There was a whole colony of the sweet songsters in the trees that grew near the pine-forest, and they sung as surely never nightingales sung elsewhere. I listened to them often, when it seemed to me that they wiled by their melodious music the very heart from my breast. But one evening—we had been at Dunroon all day—I was talking enthusiastically of the nightingales, when most of the guests present expressed a wish to hear them, and it was arranged that, as it was a fine moonlit night, we should all drive back to Jesmond Dene and stroll to the woods; afterward the guests were to take some refreshment at the hall, and then return home.

"It will be a beautiful evening, Felicia," said Lord Saxon to me—by this time mother and son had both learned to address me by my Christian name.

From the moment we left Jesmond Dene until we reached the woods, it was all a happy dream to me. I did not notice how the different groups arranged themselves; all I know was that a voice, the very tone of which made my heart vibrate with joy, said—

Lord Saxon was looking into my face; and with a fluttering heart and a deep color rising to my cheeks I turned to accompany him.

Slowly we walked by the great sombre trees, listening to the river as it rushed past the projecting rocks in its seemingly mad haste to reach the sea; at the silent twinkling stars as they kept their vigil in the heavens above. There can never again come such a night for me.

I look back to that evening as the one perfectly happy evening of my life. It was not the full sunrise of love; it

was the fresh tremulous dawn. Lord Saxon said little, and the silence that lay between us was more eloquent than words.

"Through his words the nightingales
Drove straight and full their clear long call,
Like arrows through heroic mails;
And love was awful in it all—
The nightingales, the nightingales!"

It was on this occasion that he kissed my lips; and I vowed that no other's kiss should ever lie there. A nightingale that had been singing melodiously suddenly flew from one tree to another, and we watched the flight of the bird in the pale light of the moon.

"Look, Felicia," cried Lord Saxon; "it is there!"

I looked up eagerly, and then, as my face was lowered again, he caught it and kissed my lips; while I heard him whisper, "Ever dearest Felicia!" The music of his voice and the sweetness of the caress seemed to me one. Then footsteps and laughing voices drew near us, and the charm was dispelled. But in that moment I learned what many pass a long life without learning—the very ecstasy of love.

"You have caught the moonlight in your eyes, Felicia," said aunt Annette, when we entered the brilliantly-lighted drawing-room. "You looked dazed."

So I was; but it was with happiness and love, not with the light of the moon. When our visitors prepared to depart aunt Annette and I accompanied them to the end of the lawn. Oh, fair white moon, never again will you shine for me with the same light! Never more will rose-leaf and lily-bloom be so sweet; never again will summer wind waft me such love-laden messages!

He held my hand tightly in his own as we walked across the lawn to the drive where the carriages were in readiness As we passed the cluster of acacia-trees, he said, bending down, and looking tenderly into my eyes—

"I shall never forget this night, Felicia."

"Nor shall I," I answered.

"What does it all mean, Felicia?" he asked. "What does the summer wind whisper? What do the nightingales sing? What thrills in the air and shines in the stars? What is it, my—my darling? Do you know?"

I bowed my head—ah me !—as I answered, "Yes."

"I will come to-morrow," he whispered, "and tell you what it means. Good-night, Felicia."

CHAPTER V.

To-morrow! I closed my eyes that night in an ecstasy of delight. The calm serenity of the night-skies, the gentle ripple of green leaves, the silver light of the moon, and the dark handsome face of my lover—I dared in my own heart to use the word—were with me in my dreams. The song of the nightingales and my lover's voice blended harmoniously, greeting my ears with sweet melody as I dreamed on of the morrow. "Felicia—good-night, Felicia!" was the burden of the melody; and its ravishing strains fell soothingly on my senses.

"To-morrow," was come. The sun was gilding the earth with its resplendent rays, the birds carol their songs of delight, the gentle wind, kissing the flowers, wafted their perfume abroad. Nello was coming to tell me "what it all meant." I knew that one word explained it, and that word was "love." He was coming. Patience—he would be here soon, and then my life would be crowned by the possession of his love !

I was standing under the spreading cedar-boughs, anticipating in thought the happiness that was to be mine, when a letter was brought to me. I had gone thither, knowing that he must pass by the spot. The golden sunlight that pierced through the drooping boughs was warm and pleasant. He would stand beside me, and he would tell me "what it all meant." Taking the letter from the bearer, a thrill passed through me. I knew by instinct that the note was from him. I opened it hastily. It ran thus—my first love-letter—

"I had hoped to be with you to-day, Felicia, as I have much to say to you. But I have just received a telegram from my agent in Ireland, and, if I want to save my property there from utter destruction, I must go at once. I shall not be

long absent. I hope to be back with you before the nightingales have ceased to sing."

Though the sun was shedding its warmth around, a sudden gray chill fell over everything. All the gold seemed to fade from the sunlight, the perfume to depart from the flower, the light from the skies, the glory from earth and sea. A mist of passionate tears rose before my eyes as I saw my cup of happiness dashed to the ground. It was not "to-morrow" after all; and I remembered how people always said that to-morrow never came. But he would return. I felt grieved, disappointed, but not fearful. Lady Saxon had often spoken to me of their Irish estate, Lochfin, and had expressed a wish that Lionel would sell it. The tenants were always in rebellion against the agent, and she was nervous lest harm should come to her son. He laughed at the idea. He was not afraid of disaffection or open rebellion, so he had gone amongst them; and I—

Well, the summer was not over, the roses had not ceased to bloom. All would come right if I had but the patience to wait. I should soon again see the face I loved so well.

But, notwithstanding my self-administered solace, a chill had come over the warm summer day, and I wondered vaguely why I had allowed my own life to be so completely absorbed in his. Why should this terrible dread possess me because he was not with me? And what—oh, the horror of it!—what if he never came back?

An hour afterward, while I was still standing under the cedars a second letter came. It was from Lady Saxon. Brief, but to the point, it ran—

"Come and comfort me, Felicia—I have lost my son again! I want to talk to you about him."

I went at once. Aunt Annette kissed me with a quiet smile. I think she understood more of my affairs than she chose to let me know.

"My son, my son!" That was the burden of Lady Saxon's cry; yet she was not sorry that he had gone to Ireland, for she firmly believed in his ability to allay the anger aroused against his agent. "When the people see him, they will be sure to love him," she argued, with motherly pride. "There could be no better cure for disaffection than seeing and conversing with my son."

And when the day was over she walked with me to the end of the drive.

"You have comforted me greatly, Felicia," she said. "What should I do without you? I wish you were my own daughter."

A few moments afterward she added—

"Oh, Felicia, I should be the happiest woman in the whole wide word if Nello fell in love with you and you agreed to marry him! I wonder, if he asked you to be his wife, whether you would say 'Yes?' I almost think you would."

I could laugh happily at the words, knowing what he had whispered to me.

"My daughter Felicia," she murmured, when I had taken my seat in the pony carriage—"fair as the sweetest flower that blows!"

And with those pleasant words ringing in my ears I hastened home.

The last rays of the setting sun were falling over Jesmond Dene as I drew near; a golden light lingered on the distant sea, on the pine-wood, on the rushing river, on the green pastures and the picturesque pile of buildings, which I had learned to love so well. No warning of coming tempest came to me; no shadow lay on the lovely Dene; no presentiment of coming evil possessed me. But there at the great entrance door looking pale and anxious, stood my aunt Annette.

She held out her hands to me as I ascended the flight of marble steps.

"Welcome home, my dear!" she said; but there was a strange ring in her voice, and a troubled look was on her face. "You look tired, Felicia," she continued, "you must have a glass of wine. Come in here with me."

Somewhat to my surprise, she led the way into one of the small drawing-rooms that we seldom used, and stood by in silence while I drank the wine.

"There is a little surprise for you, Felicia," she began, in a trembling voice. "Mr. Benson is here."

Mr. Benson was the family solicitor, and had for many years been intrusted with the management of the Jesmond affairs. Sir William had the most implicit faith in him. "Benson says so!" was affirmation strong enough for anything. Benson had advised him with all his investments; Benson had drawn up the will which made me, in consequence

of Paul's death, heiress of Jesmond Dene; Benson had brought us down to the Dene, and had remained with us a whole week, instructing me in my new duties, and teaching me much of which I had previously been quite ignorant. It was he who had approved all my plans for building, and who had told me that I could not spend Sir William's hoarded thousands in a better fashion.

I felt no alarm at hearing that he had come, even though it was suddenly and without notice. I was much more troubled about aunt Annette, for she seemed so unlike herself.

"He came soon after you had gone to Dunroon," she went on nervously. "He wanted me to send for you, but I thought you should have one more happy day."

"Mr. Benson would never make me unhappy," I laughed. "He is always the bearer of good news to me."

She looked at me wistfully.

"Mr. Benson desires a long talk with you on business matters," she explained. "You had better defer it until after dinner."

"I will do that with pleasure," I answered, little imagining the nature of the business.

Had I been less engrossed in my own love-story, I should have known from Mr. Benson's nervous hesitating manner that something of more than usual importance was amiss. While I was talking to the grave old lawyer, while I was dining with him, I was in fancy looking into my absent lover's face and listening to the notes of the nightingales.

"Can you spare an hour this evening," inquired Mr. Benson, "or shall I defer my business until the morning?"

It appeared to me that he was not unwilling to defer it. I had never seen him so unlike himself confused, hesitating, glancing at me strangely, beginning a speech, then ending abruptly.

I said to him at last—

"You are not well, Mr. Benson."

"No; I am in great distress." he answered.

"In distress?" It was such a strange confession for him to make. "In distress?" I repeated. "You are not ill, I hope? You have not met with any misfortune?"

"I am not ill, and the misfortune that depresses me is not mine," he said,

"Not yours!" I exclaimed; and his grave manner gave an additional significance to his words.

"The fact is," he continued, looking at me, "I have, for the first time in my professional life, made a terrible mistake."

I could only repeat the words, "A terrible mistake!"

"It is not often that lawyers do that," he said. "They are generally very cautious. I fear that in this particular business I have been neither. A lawyer," he continued, "above all men, should well consider every step he takes. In this one case I did not."

He was talking to a girl whose soul vibrated to the music of the nightingales and the sound of her lover's voice; and even those words, portentous as they were, did not startle her.

"Yet," he continued, "I cannot see how I could have helped it, or how I am to balme, though blame must lie somewhere."

"It does not lie with you, I feel sure," I said, with a faint attempt at consolation, and as a proof of my confidence in his legal acuteness.

"The worst of it," he continued, "is that the mistake I have made affects you."

"Then," I said, "it can be easily remedied." For, in my ignorance, I did not think there could be any mistake made which would seriously affect me.

"I am afraid," he went on, disregarding my interposition, "it will be a terrible blow to you. You seem so happy here."

"I am very happy here—indeed it would be impossible for any one to be happier," I replied.

"You remember the terms of Sir William's will, Miss Gordon?" he continued.

I answered that I remembered them well.

"The whole estate descended to his son Paul. The title is hereditary; the estate is not. If Paul married and had children, it went to them. If he died unmarried, it became yours."

"Yes; and it is mine, thank heaven!" I said.

"So I thought. Heaven knows I thought so," he answered; "but, Miss Gordon, it appears that Paul was married. He has left a widow and an only son."

CHAPTER VI.

THE lawyer's words fell like poisoned arrows on my heart. Paul had left a widow and an only son! That meant that I was no longer mistress of Jesmond Dene—that the splendid inheritance I had planned to do so much good with had slipped from my grasp.

There was silence between us for some time—a silence fraught with unutterable horror to me. Mr. Benson broke it as last.

"I blame myself," he said. "I ought to have made inquiries, and have been satisfied beyond the possibility of doubt that Paul Jesmond had not married; I ought to have ascertained that before helping to place you in possession. I am afraid it is a terrible blow to you," he added.

"Yes, it is," I replied—"so great a blow that I cannot at present realize it. It has stunned me."

"It stunned me," said Mr. Benson. "I was for many hours quite unable to comprehend the result of this deplorable blunder. Now I see plainly enough what I ought to have done. I should have written to India for further information before you were formally installed as mistress of Jesmond Dene."

"It would have been better," I said mechanically. "You are quite sure that there is no mistake now?" I added.

"No, everything is too well authenticated for that. There is no mistake this time. I—I cannot tell you how grieved I am—how I blame myself, but there had never been any word of Paul's marriage, he had not mentioned it, and it seems to have been but little known, even among his friends in the army. You bear the blow well, Miss Gordon."

Nevertheless, bravely as I bore this crushing reverse of fortune, it was a terrible blow to me. For a time it had banished the cherished memory of my lover's face. But slowly it began to return, and I took heart once more. The first thought that presented itself clearly to my mind was this—that, if he loved me, change of fortune would not affect him; and whilst I possessed his love nothing on earth could

affect me. By degrees hope seemed to come back to my heart, the color to my face, clear thought to my brain. Then I realized that I was no longer mistress of Jesmond Dene, and that I must give way to my cousin's little son. I confess, between smiles and tears, that the very words "My cousin's little son" softened and warmed my heart to the child as nothing else could have done, and robbed the blow of half its bitter sting. My cousin's little son—the son of the bright-faced handsome lad who had been so kind to me in my girlhood, who had kissed me, and had promised to marry me when he had seen the world! He had married some one else, and I must give way to his child, the rightful heir to Jesmond Dene. Still my heart warmed to him, for my dead cousin's sake.

"As you will remember," continued Mr. Benson, "there was no cordiality between father and son. Sir William liked to save money; Paul enjoyed spending it. The father's miserly ways made home hateful to the son. They quarreled fiercely before they parted, and I should imagine, from the tone of the letters that passed between them, that they were never on friendly terms again. Sir William refused him an allowance for some time, so deeply rooted was his anger. He afterward relented; but by that time the young fellow's heart was hardened. I know that Sir William wrote to him several times on the subject of marriage, urging him to take great care not to be so foolish as to fall in love—that he must not marry until he returned to England, and then he was to marry a wealthy woman. Money was to be his first consideration. Sir William told me all about these letters. He added also that he had never received an answer to them. That accounts," remarked Mr. Benson, "for the young fellow's silence about his marriage. There is no doubt he believed implicitly that, if his father knew of it, he would disinherit him and leave him penniless, for he married much beneath him, his wife having no dowry except a beautiful face."

"Who was she?" I asked.

"Her name was Gabrielle Fairfax," he replied, "and she was living in the family of Major Esmond as governess to his children—a very unusual thing in India; but the Esmond children were strong and healthy, and their parents did not care to part with them. She was a most beautiful and a

very good girl, Colonel Brownlow tells me, clever and accomplished, belonging to a respectable English family. She had, of course, no fortune, and no prospect of ever possessing any. Paul Jesmond fell in love with and married her. No one knew of the marriage, except Major Esmond and his wife. Paul dared not let it be known lest his father should hear of it. He never spoke of it even to his most intimate friends ; but he told Major Esmond that when he returned to England he should take his wife straight to Jesmond Dene, and trust to her lovely face to win him his father's forgiveness. Miss Gordon, I can hear in fancy his cheery young voice saying, ' When my father sees her, he will relent.' He was always sanguine, poor Paul ! "

I knew that—my bright-faced handsome cousin ! Mr. Benson went on—

" He rented a pretty little house on the Neilgherry Hills for his wife, and they lived very happily for two years, no one guessing his secret. A son was born there ; and Paul Jesmond, who knew the importance of that son's birth, took the precaution of having it properly registered, and of keeping a copy of the registration. The child was christened by the resident chaplain, who, in his turn, faithfully kept the promise of secrecy that he had given. Paul took yet another precaution, which, for one so habitually careless as himself, seems to be somewhat remarkable. He gathered together the needful papers—his certificate of marriage and the certificate of his son's birth—and placed them together, with a long letter to his father, telling him all the story of his marriage, and begging, if anything happened to him, that he would be kind to his wife and child.

" ' Let little Guy succeed me,' he wrote. ' Do not visit the offenses of the father on the son. However faulty I may have been, do not disinherit my boy. My marriage may displease you, but you will forgive me when you see my wife's face. And she is as good as she is beautiful. I love her with all my heart. There comes to me, father, at times a presentiment that I shall die young. If I do, be kind to my wife and child. Let my wife have the honor that falls to the widowed ladies of Jesmond Dene, and let my son succeed to the estate. I am your only son ; you will not refuse my prayer. I am writing this, so that, should anything happen

to me, my wife may bring it in her hands to you, and you, in your turn, will do justice to her.'

"So runs the letter, Miss Gordon."

By that time my eyes were full of tears, and I had begun to forget my own troubles, and to think only of the handsome bright-eyed lad who had loved me when I was a child, and of his little son.

"It appears," continued Mr. Benson, "that Paul fell ill very suddenly with one of those terribly malignant fevers so common in the East. He had been appointed to some slight military command where he would be detained three months. The name of the place to which he was sent, and where he died, was Faizabad. As a matter of course, he bade farewell to his wife, she knowing that the separation would be for three months; and during that time, not having expected to hear from him, she was not anxious about him. His comrade on the fatal expedition was Captain Archie Hartigan, who was by his side when he died. It seems that on the day before his death, while some little consciousness still remained, Paul placed a small package in Captain's Hartigan's hands, with these words, "Find out my wife, and give her this to take to my father.' Captain Hartigan intended to fulfill the commission at the earliest moment; but, even before his friend was laid to rest, he himself was stricken down with the same fever, and lay for some time hovering between life and death. Other officers were sent to Faizabad, and for many weeks the package left by Captain Jesmond was not delivered. The first thing that Captain Hartigan did, when restored to health, was to go to Colonel Brownlow and give him Paul's message—'Find out my wife, and give her this to take home to my father.' The colonel declared that Captain Jesmond had never married. He made the fullest possible inquiries, but could obtain no confirmation of any such marriage. None of Paul's brother-officers knew anything of it. Major Esmond did not belong to the same regiment; and unfortunately just at that time he was away on military business, so that there was no one to throw any light upon the matter. But, when Major Esmond returned, and heard what had happened, he went at once to Colonel Brownlow, and told him the whole story. The colonel was not very well pleased, and blamed Major Esmond for having connived at the secret marriage of a young officer. Then

Captain Hartigan was sent to find the young wife, so soon widowed, and to communicate to her the intelligence of her husband's death. He found her with her infant son. She was beautiful as a dream, and good as she was fair. Her distress was terrible when she learnt the sad news, for it appears that she had dearly loved her husband. At first she refused to believe that he was dead; and then she declined to go home to England. She wanted to be left alone to die in peace where he had left her. It was represented to her how greatly such a course would injure the prospects of the boy, who, on his grandfather's death, would in all probability become Sir Guy Jesmond and master of Jesmond Dene. For the child's sake she consented to do what she would never have done for her own—return to England, and see her husband's father. She would not however accept any escort, though Colonel Brownlow would have placed her under the protection of an officer and his wife who were shortly returning to England, Mrs. Esmond implored her to take a maid; but she would not; she would travel alone, her only companion being her fatherless boy. Colonel Brownlow gave her the precious package, and she sailed from Calcutta in the *Caspian Queen*, and reached London safely."

"Reached London!" I exclaimed. "Then she is near—quite near?"

"Yes," replied the lawyer gravely. "The news of Sir William's death was not known in the regiment when she left, and Colonel Brownlow, understanding that I was the family solicitor, advised her to come straight to me. She did not do so, but allowed a fortnight to elapse, and then she came."

"Then you have seen her?" I cried.

"Yes," he answered, "I have seen her;" and the old lawyer was strangely silent after that.

"What about her?" I asked eagerly. "What do you think of her?"

"She is simply the most beautiful woman I have ever beheld," he replied.

"And good as beautiful?" I asked again.

"I could not judge; she was not with me very long—though long enough to convince me that her claims are valid and legal. She is Lady Jesmond, and her son is Sir Guy."

"Heaven bless my cousin's little son, Sir Guy?" I managed to say, although my eyes were blinded with tears.

"I am glad, I am thankful that you bear it so well," said Mr. Benson. "I have never felt so anxious or so unhappy in my life as I have felt over this unfortunate business. But who would have thought that Paul would marry entirely for beauty, and then hide his wife in the Neilgherry Hills? I do not know what would have been the result of this match if Sir William had lived."

"You say Paul married her entirely for her beauty; surely he must have loved her?"

"Yes, there is no doubt he did," he replied. Still there was a significant hesitation in his manner.

"You do not like her?" I said, divining, as I believed, his true thoughts. I put the question so suddenly that he had not time to think before he answered.

"No—indeed I do not," he replied, with an air of great relief. "But she will be here to-morrow, Miss Gordon. She would not come with me, but it was arranged that she should follow me."

CHAPTER VII.

Until long after midnight aunt Annette, Mr. Benson, and I sat discussing this—to me—momentous matter. One thing was certain—there was no deception, no flaw in the evidence, no informality in the marriage; everything was perfectly straightforward and strictly legal. Aunt Annette wanted me to dispute the claim—possession was nine points of the law, she contended. But Mr. Benson declared that it would be absolutely useless—nay, he added gravely that it would be wrong to contest a claim so fully established. There was not the least doubt about any of the facts, and the case was as strong as it well could be. Indeed Mr. Benson, who was an upright man as well as a clever lawyer, pointed out that, even if there should be a slight flaw in any of the evidence, that would not alter the fact that Paul's son was entitled to succeed him. Womanlike, I was most curious to know why he did not like Lady Jesmond; but to this question he could

give me no satisfactory answer. She was beautiful, graceful, well-bred.

"She gives me the idea of one who has been brought up in France," he said. "And, *entre nous*, Miss Gordon, I do not like French training."

Then came the question, what was to be done with me? What course ought I to pursue with regard to my future? Aunt Annette, who was vexed 'and angry at this untoward appearance of a claimant for my throne, declared that I should go back with her to the little house we had left but a few months before. But that had been let just as it stood, therefore we could not return to it for a time at least. Mr. Benson counseled us to wait.

"Wait until you see her, Miss Gordon, until you know what she intends to do. You have many undertakings on hand; she may desire to go on with some of them, and ask your co-operation. Be patient and wait."

When I retired to rest that night, sleep came not to my weary eyes, for my mind was full of the romance of this beautiful young widow who was coming to Jesmond Dene to reign in my stead. As a matter of course, I felt most bitterly and keenly the loss of this my princely inheritance. It was as much lost to me on that first evening when I heard the news as afterward when others reigned there supreme. Crushing and keen was the ever-recurring thought that I was no longer "queen and mother" of my people; they were no longer my loyal and affectionate subjects. I thought of the half-built almshouses, of the hospital and schools, of the thousand and one plans I had conceived for the benefit of those living around me, and my heart ached at the thought that my dreams would not be realized. Still, if the goodness of her heart were in accord with her personal charms, the probabilities were that Lady Jesmond would be pleased with the work I had begun, and carry it on. What a dream of wealth and luxury, benevolence and happiness it had been to me! And now I must go back to the dreary seclusion that had been mine before.

But no! Now that love had dawned in my soul, the dreariness of my past life could never recur. I knew by instinct that Lady Saxon would love me none the less for my loss of fortune—that she would be superior to such sordid meanness as to allow her feelings toward me to change be-

cause I was no longer mistress of Jesmond Dene. And I was equally certain that Lord Saxon, than whom a more generous-hearted man never lived, would love me as hitherto. My heart found perfect rest in these pleasant thoughts.

Early on the following morning my aunt Annette fell ill, and Lady Saxon came over to see me. I looked full and straight into my old friend's kindly face while I told my story. If I had detected the slightest coldness toward me, the slightest shade of disappointment, I should have shrunk from her. But thee was nothing but the most loving sympathy and motherly affection depicted on her countenance, She listened for some time in silent amazement; and then she spoke:

"Felicia," she said, "you shall share my home and my purse; you shall be my dear adopted daughter, and I will make you so happy that you shall not miss Jesmond Dene. I love you the better now that I see how bravely and how well you can bear such a disastrous stroke of ill-fortune. I wonder what this Lady Jesmond is like."

"Beautiful as a dream, I am told," I answered.

"A worshiper of beauty, a dreamer of dreams." The words returned to me with vivid force. They were Lady Saxon's description of her son.

How kind and good she was to me at this trying period of my life! I ought even to have been grateful for the misfortune which brought to me such disinterested love. She would have been pleased and proud to carry me off there and then, but I was destined to remain for many a long day at Jesmond Dene. I knew little of the world, my experience being limited to the few acquaintances of my aunt and Lady Saxon's; but I knew enough to be sure that it was a marvelous thing to find one perfectly disinterested friend.

"I think," said Mr. Benson, "that it would be as well to send a carriage to Honton station to meet Lady Jesmond. I do not know the hour at which she will arrive, but she said she should come to-day."

"She will doubtless feel nervous," I remarked, "and slightly uncomfortable. It is not a very pleasant position for her."

Mr. Benson looked at me with his eyes opened to their widest extent.

"I saw no sign of nervousness in her," he observed. "She seemed perfectly self-possessed and mistress of the situation."

The words jarred upon me.

"You must feel the position a painful one," he added kindly.

"But she is said to be as good as she is beautiful," I cried; "and good women are sensitive."

"Not all," he rejoined. "Many women have the most matter-of-fact natures; they are sensitive neither for themselves nor others; yet they are good women."

"I think sensitiveness a noble virtue," I remarked.

"It is hardly that," he replied. "It is rather a quality that directs many others. Lady Jesmond is not sensitive, I am sure," Mr. Benson went on. "She did not seem to think how this change would affect any one but herself. You will send the carriage for her, by-the-bye?"

I did send it, with orders that it was to remain at the railway station and await all the London trains. I sent also for the doctor from Honton to see my aunt Annette. On his arrival he spoke rather gravely of her condition. I told him that she desired to go away from Jesmond Dene at once; but he said she would imperil her life if she were so rash. So perforce, whether we liked it or not, we must remain as guests within the walls of what had for a brief period been our own home.

"Forgive me, Miss Gordon," the doctor said, before leaving; "but as I came along I heard a rumor which I venture most earnestly to hope is not true."

I knew at once that the story in some way or other had leaked out.

"You mean," I said slowly, "that we have had news from India, and that my cousin Paul has left both a widow and a son?"

"That is what I heard. Is it true, Miss Gordon?" asked Dr. Bland.

"It is perfectly true," I replied. "We expect the young widow, Lady Jesmond, and her son here to-day."

"True? I did not believe it. There will be a revolution amongst the people, for you are greatly beloved here, Miss Gordon."

"Right is right," I answered; "and my cousin's little son is the heir to Jesmond Dene."

He said no more, but when he was gone I sought Mr. Benson and told him what had occurred, and that I thought

it would be preferable to call all the servants together and tell them what had happened rather than that they should be left to hear it piecemeal from strangers. He quite agreed with me; and the whole household was gathered together in the servants' hall, where Mr. Benson told them the story of Paul's marriage and death, and announced that the widowed Lady Jesmond, with her little son Sir Guy, was coming that day to take possession. Mr. Benson told me, with tears in his eyes, that when he had finished his narration there was but one cry among the servants, and that was for Miss Gordon. They all loved Miss Gordon; they did not want to lose Miss Gordon.

"They are devotedly attached to you," he said; and my heart was comforted by the knowledge that I retained the affection of those about me.

Noon came, but still there was no sound of carriage-wheels. Then followed a long sultry afternoon, during which Mr. Benson, who was miserably anxious and nervous, dropped off to sleep.

That afternoon many callers came, for the news had spread throughout the district. I ought to have been, and I was, consoled by the many expressions of kindness and sympathy. No one seemed to think it strange that Paul had married, or that his widow should come home to claim his heritage. The general impression seemed to be that it was a thousand pities Sir William and his son had not been on better terms, when Captain Jesmond would have had no reason to conceal his marriage, and the unfortunate mistake would never have been made.

The long afternoon had passed, my visitors had all departed, and Mr. Benson had awaked from his slumbers; still there was no sound of carriage-wheels to herald the approach of Lady Jesmond.

"I cannot stand much more of this kind of thing," said the lawyer. "I do not think I ever knew what suspense meant before."

"I have ordered dinner for seven," I said. And just as I uttered the words we heard the sound, so long and anxiously awaited, of carriage-wheels. "They are here!" I cried.

But no warning came to me of what was to follow in the wake of the home-coming of Lady Jesmond.

CHAPTER VIII.

"SHALL you go to meet Lady Jesmond?"

"Yes," I replied; "she shall have a kindly welcome home."

I went out into the entrance-hall, and there I saw three figures. One was that of a tiny child, crying with fatigue; the second was a tall elderly woman dressed in deep mourning, who seemed to be a nurse; the third, a tall graceful lady dressed in deep black crape. This was the young widow, Lady Jesmond. I went to her with outstretched hands—for was she not Paul's widow?—but she did not or would not see them; for she merely gave me a cool little nod, and said—

"Are you Felicia Gordon?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Mr. Benson told me about you," she said. "Is he here? I am Lady Jesmond."

"Mr. Benson is here," I replied, "and has been anxiously expecting you."

"I hope," she said, "that we are in time for dinner; I am very hungry. It has been a tiresome journey."

I had had some faint idea of falling on her neck and bidding her welcome to the home that I was about to relinquish to her—some faint idea of telling her how I bade her welcome for Paul's sake; but the manner in which she met my advances checked my ardor. It was evident the lady felt no emotion on reaching the home of her husband's boyhood. She was hungry!

"Dinner is at seven," I answered; and she must have noticed the change in my voice, for she looked at me.

"Seven!" she repeated. "Why, it is only just six now!"

Then I turned from her, and Heaven knows, although he had deprived me of my inheritance, tears of honest affection filled my eyes when I saw Paul's little son. I should have known the child was Paul's, no matter where I had seen him, his face was so like his father's. He had the same dark laughing eyes, with a golden light in their depths, the same brows, the same dark curls.

"Why," I cried, "this child is the living image of dear Paul!"

Lady Jesmond turned to me quickly, and there was a strange inflection in her voice.

"Did you know Paul?" she asked.

"I knew him well when he was a boy," I answered. "I knew him here at Jesmond Dene. I was his cousin."

"Yes, I know that—Mr. Benson told me; but I was not aware that you knew him," she remarked. Then her voice softened a little as she said, "I shall like to talk to you about him."

When she uttered these words, the bright handsome face of my dead cousin rose before me, and seemed to ask pleadingly for kindness to his wife. She should receive it from me for the sake of olden days.

I took the bonny little fellow into my arms and caressed him fondly. He ceased crying, and looked with piteous eyes into my face.

"Mamma," he cried, "mamma!"

"I am here, Guy," replied Lady Jesmond quickly. "Be a good boy, dear."

"He is tired," I said, "Shall I take him to the nursery we have prepared for him? It is the same his father had."

I saw her make a quick gesture to the woman who stood near. She came forward instantly.

"I am the child's nurse," she said, and prepared to take him from me; but the little fellow resisted all her efforts and clasped his baby arms tightly round my neck.

"Never mind, nurse," interposed Lady Jesmond. "If Miss Gordon likes to trouble herself with a tiresome child, let her; I am sure it is very kind of her. Guy must be good," she added, turning to the little fellow, who still clung eagerly to me.

The sound of her voice, sweet and musical as it was, did not seem to appease the child. Again in a piteous voice he cried—

"Mamma!"

"I am here," Lady Jesmond repeated. "You had better take him, nurse; he seems inclined to be cross. I have but little patience with crying children," she continued. Then, turning to me, she asked, "Have you?"

"Unfortunately for me, I have been but little with chil-

dren," I said; "but I do not think my patience would fail."

"Shall I take Sir Guy now, and give him his bath, my lady?" asked the nurse. "Then I can come and help your ladyship to dress."

"See that you have all you want yourself, nurse. Ring for wine or tea, and see that you have every comfort," said Lady Jesmond, much to my astonishment.

I thought that speech showed decided consideration for others, and it pleased me.

The child continued to cry as he was carried off to the nursery, and the sound was strange in that old house, where children had not lived for so many years.

"He is very cross to-night," said Lady Jesmond. "I wish I could break him of that absurd habit he has of always crying for me."

"It is natural enough," I answered. "Children generally cry for their mothers."

"Things that are most natural are not always most pleasant," said Lady Jesmond, decidedly.

And then I wondered whether she had any heart, whether she felt any emotion on coming to this her husband's home—the place where his boyish days had been spent.

"It must have been a trial," I said to her, "for you to come home without Paul."

"Yes, a great trial," she replied; but there was no note of regret or pain in the calm sweet voice. "I think, Miss Gordon, I will go to my room now. I have brought no maid with me; perhaps I can have a little assistance from yours."

"With pleasure," I replied.

During all this time she had stood with her traveling cloak, which was slightly edged with fur, even though it was summer, drawn tightly around her, and her face closely veiled.

"I am afraid," I said, "that you feel cold."

"Cold!" she repeated, in a tone of wonder.

"Most people suffer much from cold when they first come from India," I remarked.

"Yes; I suffered greatly the first few days after my arrival in England. I did not attempt to leave the house for a fortnight, but postponed my visit to Mr. Benson until I felt a little seasoned. Now I will go to my room."

I did not ask her where she had been staying, or with

whom. She was not the kind of person with whom I felt I could take such a liberty, however kind the intention might be.

My maid was summoned, and showed her ladyship to her room. I was left with conflicting sensations, and I seemed quite unable to form any idea of the character of my newly-found cousin. If any one had asked me whether I liked her, I could not have answered the question.

I hastened to give aunt Annette, who was anxiously awaiting me, an account of the interview. I could not tell her what I thought of Lady Jesmond, for I had no definitely-formed opinion upon the point. I told her all about the pretty child with his father's face, and the elderly nurse, and of Lady Jesmond's solicitude for her.

"That speaks well for her," said aunt Annette. "Good women are always thoughtful for their servants."

Why did those words haunt me—"good as she is beautiful?"

I did not go down-stairs until the dinner-bell rang; when I did so, I found Mr. Benson alone in the dining-room. Her ladyship had not yet come down.

"Well?" he cried, eagerly, and waited for me to speak.

The next moment the rustling of silk and crape told us that Lady Jesmond was near.

I cannot describe what I felt when I beheld her ladyship's marvelous loveliness. I have never seen anything like it; it was perfect, surpassing loveliness; and with it was that subtle irresistible charm which men call fascination. As I gazed at her, Lady Saxon's words came back to me—"a worshiper of beauty, dreamer of dreams."

Tall and slender, her figure was the very perfection of grace. She had such shapely shoulders as are rarely seen; and, lightly veiled by thin black crape, they shown white as alabaster through their gauzy covering. Her hands were delicate and white, and were adorned with many valuable rings; her arms were as though they had been sculptured. She was a blonde of the purest type; even the hot sun of India had not marred the faultless delicacy of her complexion. Her eyes were blue, large, bright, and clear, full of fire, with a gleam of passion—eyes that could smile and flash, that could woo with all sweetness and "scorn with all fire"—eyes that startled by their unusual brightness and their

depth of expression. The brows were dark and straight Her mouth was perfect, with the most alluring dimples; yet there was in the short upper lip something that told of pride and scorn. From her crown of golden hair to her dainty little feet, she was simply a masterpiece of Nature's handiwork, without one blemish in her fair loveliness.

Even Mr. Benson's calm face flushed as he hastened to greet her with a low bow and extended hand.

"I am glad to see you looking so well, Lady Jesmond," he said.

She looked at him with a world of mischief in her eyes.

"You do not say 'Welcome to Jesmond!'" she remarked, playfully. "That is because Miss Gordon is here, and you think it would hardly be in good taste. You are right, but Miss Gordon and I are already very good friends."

Mr. Benson was quite at a loss how to reply to these candid utterances. It seemed that her beauty had robbed him of all power of speech. She then turned to me with an amused smile, and I could see that she was gratified by my look of admiration.

CHAPTER IX.

LADY JESMOND went at once to the head of the table, taking her place there as though it had been her custom for years. She smiled and nodded familiarly at me as she took her seat, but made no remark. She talked gayly and brilliantly during dinner, and did not seem at all conscious of being in a strange position; nor did she appear to realize that her coming could have caused me any pain. She spoke without constraint, and evidently had nothing to conceal. She looked round the luxuriously-appointed dinner-table with undisguised satisfaction.

"It seems a strange turn of fate that has brought me here," she said, "and made me mistress of all this wealth *pro tem.*"

"You can scarcely call it '*pro tem*,'" said Mr. Benson. "Your son is a long way from his twenty-first birthday. How old is he now?"

"He will be two years old in September," she replied;

"so that I shall be queen-regent for almost twenty years. I shall heartily enjoy my regency in this delightful spot."

I looked at Mr. Benson, and he at me. The words struck me as exceedingly strange, for it is not often that one hears a young widow speak of the years she must pass without the society of her husband as enjoyable ones.

"Did my cousin Paul talk much about Jesmond Dene?" I asked her.

"Not very much," she replied.

"Did he seem angry with Sir William?" asked Mr. Benson.

"No not angry—that is not the word," she answered. quickly. "He was vexed at what he considered his meanness."

"It was strange that Captain Jesmond made no allusion to his marriage," remarked Mr. Benson.

Lady Jesmond laughed, giving her head a dainty little toss at the same time.

"I do not think so," she answered. "I had no fortune, and all Sir William's letters to his son on the subject of matrimony began and ended with one piece of advice—he must marry some one with money. Unluckily I had none."

"You could not expect to monopolize all the good gifts of this world," said the lawyer politely.

She laughed; and truly her laugh was like a silvery chime.

"Paul said he should never write to Sir William about his marriage, but, when he could get leave of absence, he should bring me home. He had an idea that I was quite irresistible, and that Sir William had only to see me to love me," said Lady Jesmond, looking into the lawyer's face with an expression which fairly bewildered that good man. "What do you think, Mr. Benson? Would Sir William have liked me?" she asked ingenuously.

"I am afraid he liked nothing but gold," the lawyer answered.

She laughed merrily, disclosing as she did so her even pearly white teeth.

"I had no idea," she remarked presently, "that Jesmond Dene was so extensive, or that Sir William was so rich. Paul spoke of him as a wealthy man; but I did not think he had such unbounded wealth."

"It is a pleasant surprise," said Mr. Benson.

"Very pleasant," replied Lady Jesmond, with a bright little laugh. "When one has suffered all one's life as I have for want of money, such a surprise is, I can assure you, fully appreciated."

I liked her better after these outspoken expressions. She was evidently not in the least ashamed of having been poor.

"More than half the world live in misery from want of money," she continued. "My parents were comparatively poor, and I had to leave home when I was quite a girl to earn my own living."

Mr. Benson ventured to suggest that early contact with the world helped to form and brace the character.

"If it be so, I have had a long experience," she said laughingly, "for I began to teach when I was very young."

No, certainly she had no false pride. I had never heard any one speak more openly, and I liked her for it.

When dinner was over, we left Mr. Benson with his bottle of favorite old port, and returned to the drawing-room. Lady Jesmond appeared absorbed in deep thought, and it was only when I was about to leave the room to visit aunt Annette that she broke the silence.

"Stay with me, will you, Miss Gordon?" she said. "I feel lonely and strange to-night."

"Ah, then," I thought to myself, "she is not devoid of feeling; but her strong will keeps the emotional side of her nature hidden from the world!"

"I will stay with pleasure, if you desire it," I answered.

She crossed the room, and came over to where I was standing. How well I remember the scene! The sun had set and the lovely landscape was shrouded as by a misty veil. The French windows were wide open, and the perfume borne on the evening air filled the room.

"What a fair sweet night!" I remarked.

She looked calmly from the window; there was no admiration in her eyes.

"It is well enough," she said; and then, laying her hands on my shoulders, and looking down—for she was taller than I—into my face, she added slowly, "Miss Gordon, you have reason to hate me and my little son."

"I have no reason to entertain any such feeling toward you or the child," I replied half indignantly.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

"I came at the beginning of February," I answered.

"Time enough for you to grow deeply attached to Jesmond Dene," she remarked, in slow measured tones.

"I love it with all my heart," I confessed.

"You have grown accustomed to receiving a large income —to doing what you liked with vast sums of money?"

"I was not long in learning the lesson," I answered, with a smile. "Mr. Benson tells me that you have begun many improvements on the estate—that you are building schools, an hospital and almshouses."

"It is true, Lady Jesmond."

"He tells me also that you are already a model lady of the manor."

"He is very kind to say so," I answered, with a glow of pride at the thought that my honest endeavors had been appreciated.

"Do you know, Miss Gordon," she said, drawing nearer to me, "I am exceedingly sorry? Not sorry that my son will succeed to what you have looked upon as your inheritance; but I am truly grieved because of the great loss you have sustained."

She spoke so kindly that my heart was touched.

"It is," I admitted, "a great loss. Still I have no right to complain of the course events have taken. It is right that Paul's son should inherit what is legally his. I do not see that any one is to blame."

"You might have been spared the pain of all this had more care been exercised by those whose duty it was to make the fullest inquiries," she said.

"Yes; but I shall not give up all hope and pleasure in life because I have lost Jesmond Dene."

She looked at me earnestly—so earnestly that I could not be offended when she said—

"You are beautiful enough to marry well."

"I shall not redeem my fallen fortunes by marriage," I answered; but my heart throbbed wildly and my face flushed as I spoke. Marriage meant love, love meant Nello; and again the music of the nightingales seemed to ring in my ears, and I heard him whisper—"Felicia."

"Well," said Lady Jesmond, "we won't speculate as to what might have been, but will confine ourselves to the stern reality of what is. I thought when I came here that you would be my bitterest enemy, that you might possibly contest my claim."

"No one could contest your claim who had looked into little Guy's face," I replied, "for he is the very image of Paul."

"Still it was in your power to make things very disagreeable," she continued. "You might have given me much trouble; but you have yielded at once so generously, so gracefully, so kindly, and, I may add, so nobly, that I cannot help saying I am deeply grateful to you for my son's sake. I thank you, Miss Gordon. And now I want to ask a favor of you. Will you stay here at Jesmond Dene with me—for a year at the very least? I do not know what your plans for the future may be; but this I promise you—you shall not leave Jesmond Dene without a handsome dowry. Before anything is settled, give me the promise that you will remain with me for one year—not as mistress of the house, but as my companion and helpmate. You say you loved your cousin Paul—promise me for his sake."

"Will you tell me why you require that promise, why you desire me to stay with you, Lady Jesmond?"

"Yes, as frankly as you ask. I am a stranger here, and shall feel lonely. The position is new to me, and I do not quite know how to fill it. I should be glad to learn from you, if you will teach me. I am not accustomed to the management of a large household, and I am not sure even whether I understand what is and what is not etiquette in England. Will you stay and teach me?"

In response to her earnest pleading eyes, I promised, not that I would remain with her for a year, but that I would stay as long as I could.

"So much may happen in a year," I thought to myself: I would not promise for a year.

CHAPTER X.

On the following morning Lady Jesmond asked me to show her over the house. It was still early when we went through all the suites of luxuriously furnished rooms.

"I had no idea the place was so large," she said time after time; and the more she saw of it the more serious she grew. "What a place to lose and to win!" she murmured. "How could Paul leave such a home?" she added wonderingly.

"He preferred independence to luxury," I answered.

Then from the lawn I pointed out to her all the beauties of Jesmond Dene—the restless sea in the distance; the fragrant pine forest; the shady woods; the clear deep river; the fertile meadow-lands—ah, and even the steep green hill from which I had surveyed the smiling landscape, believing it to be mine—all mine!

"It must be hard for you to give it up, Miss Gordon," she said again.

"It is hard; but I shall do it with a good grace," I answered. Then, thinking that she would like to see her boy, I suggested that we should go to the nursery.

"What for?" she asked, opening wide her bright blue eyes.

"To see little Guy," I replied.

"He is all right," she said curtly; "nurse will take good care of him. The little gentleman lives in clover, I assure you."

"What is the nurse's name?" I asked suddenly, without any particular reason.

For a moment I wns startled by the change that overspread her countenance. She looked at me with a vague expression, as though she did not know; then, recovering herself quickly, she answered—

"Mrs. Rivers."

"Has she been with you long?" I asked.

"No," she replied carelessly; "I brought no nurse with

me from India. I engaged Mrs. Rivers on reaching England."

"You had good references with her without doubt?" I said.

"She is well-known to some very near and dear friends of mine," replied Lady Jesmond, "and is an excellent nurse. I can trust little Guy with her at all times."

"She struck me as being rather a peculiar woman," I ventured to say.

"In what way?" asked Lady Jesmond; and her voice seemed to grow sharp and harsh.

"Rather above her station, I fancied—ladylike; and she speaks well," I answered.

Suddenly the roses she had been gathering fell from her hands, and I noticed that her face grew white and that a slight tremor passed over her.

"You are ill, Lady Jesmond!" I cried.

"No," she answered; "I am only cold. Though you call it summer, there is no warmth in the sun." Yet she did not look cold, but frightened and ill.

Longing to see more of Paul's little son, I went to the nursery when Lady Jesmond retired to her room. It struck me at once that the nurse was not very pleased to see me.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Rivers," I said.

She looked at me with an expression of blank surprise, and after a moment's hesitation returned my salutation. I knew from tradition that nurses are autocrats, and, as I desired to see much of the child, I perceived that I must conciliate her.

"May I see the little one and play with him for a short time?" I asked.

She looked at me half hesitatingly, and I felt sure that she longed to say "No," but she smiled and answered politely—

"Certainly, if you wish it, Miss Gordon."

And then she brought the child, who was laughing and crowing with delight, to me.

I took him in my arms and caressed him; but, when he saw that I was a stranger, the merry laughter died away, and the eyes so like his father's looked with pathetic inquiry into mine.

"Mamma," he said wistfully, "mamma!"

In a moment Mrs. Rivers was by his side.

"Bless the dear child," she said, "that is his cay the whole day long—nothing but 'mamma.'"

And again the large solemn baby-eyes looked into mine, as he cried—

"Mamma!"

"Your mamma is tired, little Guy," I said.

Mrs. Rivers looked up anxiously as she caught my words.

"Is Lady Jesmond tired? She is not very strong. People who come from India never are."

"As she was looking over the house with me," I answered, "she shivered violently, as though she was ill."

"How was that?" she asked nervously.

"I do not know—probably because she went out on the lawn without hat or mantle," I answered.

"Lady Jesmond is not strong," repeated the nurse. "If you would be so kind as to remain here with Sir Guy, Miss Gordon, I will go and see how her ladyship is."

Quite willingly I remained with the little fellow, kissing him to my heart's content. I tried to make him say "Felicia," and, after many futile attempts, the rosy little lips managed to murmur "Leesy," much to my delight. But what question did those baby-eyes ask when they looked into my face and he cried "Mamma"?

After waiting some time, I began to feel anxious about Lady Jesmond.

"Come with me, Baby Guy," I said. "We will go and see mamma."

And again into his eyes came the look of wonder and questioning that I had noticed before. I remember how I danced the boy down the long corridors, and how his merry little laugh resounded in the otherwise silent house.

Thinking Lady Jesmond might be ill, I went quietly to her door. Before I had time to rap or to speak I heard voices; and then Mrs. Rivers said—

"You must be careful, Gabrielle."

I knocked at once before I could hear more, and, when the door was opened, and they saw me, a strange confusion seemed to come over them.

"Have you been waiting long, Miss Gordon?" asked Mrs. Rivers sharply.

"No; I have just come," I replied. And then it flashed

across my mind that she suspected me of listening. She would not suspect me of such meanness unless she were capable of it herself, I thought; and, as I turned to her, I caught her eyes fixed steadily on me. They were not the most friendly glances that we exchanged.

"I was afraid that you were ill," I said to Lady Jesmond.

"I was tired this morning, Felicia," she answered gently; "and when I am tired I am afraid that I give way to fits of moodiness. I am better now."

I then left, taking Baby Guy with me. But we did not dance down the passages this time, for my honor had been wounded by the suspicion this woman had cast upon me. Why was she on such confidential terms with the mistress of Jesmond Dene? Addressing her with formal respect when they were in public, why did she call her "Gabrielle" when they were alone?

Lady Jesmond was wonderfully kind to her. She had two rooms most comfortably furnished, and she was waited upon by an undernurse who did all the work. She had every delicacy supplied to her, and her ladyship insisted that she should take wine. Indeed no servant could have led a more comfortable life than Mrs. Rivers led. She was much attached to the child, and seemed very devoted to Lady Jesmond; but there was nothing by which I could account for the strange familiarity which undoubtedly existed between them. I saw Lady Jesmond angry once, and I was the unintentional cause of it. We were talking about the boy's future, about Eton and Harrow, Oxford and Cambridge, when, quite accidentally and without attaching much meaning to the words, I said—

"You will have to decide upon one or the other when Mrs. Rivers has gone."

Lady Jesmond turned to me with flashing eyes.

"That time will never come," she said. Mrs. Rivers will never leave me."

I was surprised that she should display so much feeling about such an insignificant matter. Then, seeing my look of wonder, she apologized.

"I am so impatient, Felicia," she said; "and I am very much attached to nurse. I should not like to lose her."

"I hope you never will," I replied. And, though we spoke of it no more, the subject did not fade from my mind.

CHAPTER XI.

A WEEK had elapsed and no news had come from Ireland. Lady Saxon came over every day to Jesmond Dene, for she knew I was a very willing listener to anything she had to say about Nello, and his silence had caused her considerable anxiety. She was very kind and attentive to aunt Annette, whose health did not improve; but to Lady Jesmond she seemed to have a quiet antipathy. They were most polite to each other but rarely spoke except to exchange ordinary civilities.

"She is as you say, Felicia, a most beautiful woman; but I do not like her; and I do not know why," Lady Saxon would say to me; while Lady Jesmond would half reproach me by saying—

"I cannot understand what you see in Lady Saxon. She is excessively proud and haughty, almost repellent. I shall never like her."

Lady Saxon was very kind to the little heir, and always asked to see him when she came, never forgetting to bring him presents of toys, and she soon became a favorite with the child, and even the nurse.

Mr. Benson had gone away much relieved in mind. He was delighted that I was going to remain for some time at the Dene, that Lady Jesmond and myself were good friends, and that her ladyship had insisted on making me an allowance.

"I do not care," she said to the lawyer, "whether the money is taken from my income or my son's. Miss Gordon must have it."

We lived in peace and harmony, and as the days went on our friendship ripened and expanded.

"I call you Felicia," she said to me one morning; "you should call me Gabrielle. I prefer it."

And it was mutually agreed that for the future we should address each other by our Christian names.

"You are sure to have a love-story, Felicia," she said, after contemplating me earnestly as I stood before her; "and, unless I am a false prophet, it will not be a happy one."

"Why do you think so?" I asked her.

"I can read it," she replied, "in your face and eyes."

"You have had a love-story of your own," I said.

"I," she cried, her brilliant eyes opened wide—"I? Oh, no; I have had no love-story."

"But you married Paul for love?" I said; and her face flushed crimson.

She laughed, and seemed slightly confused.

"To tell you the truth, Felicia," she said, "I feel that I could love more deeply, more passionately than I loved Paul. I was young, and marriage presented an easy escape from those tiresome children. Besides, I had a great desire to be Lady Jesmond. I did love Paul, but I am sure that I could love more deeply than I loved him."

"You do not mean to say that you would marry again, Gabrielle?" I cried, in astonishment.

"I am certain I shall if I fall in love and the right man asks me;" and she laughed. "You look disappointed, Felicia."

"I have hitherto thought of you as belonging entirely to Paul and little Guy and Jesmond Dene," I answered.

"You thought I should be an ideal widow and live here in seclusion, devoting myself entirely to the education of my son and the cultivation of a lifelong sorrow. But I do not aim at such perfection."

"Your heart is not buried in your husband's grave," I remarked.

"No; it is beating, living full of hope, light, and longing for pleasures and gayeties. I shall stay here at Jesmond Dene quietly for a year, and then you will see what will happen, Felicia."

"You are by no means a model widow," I said.

"I am just a trifle more honest than many," she rejoined. "I was very sorry to lose Paul, and I would have done anything to save his life; but, as it was the will of Heaven that he should die, I do not see why the remainder of my life should be all darkness and gloom; do you?"

"Certainly not, if the loss of him does not make it so," I answered.

"I am ambitious," she said. "I intend to marry well, unless my ambition is spoiled by love."

We were standing on the balcony outside the library window which commanded an excellent view of the river and

the long avenue of chestnuts forming the drive. Never had I seen Lady Jesmond look fairer. The fresh morning air had tinted her cheeks with a delicate rose-bloom, her blue eyes were bright as stars, and the light summer wind toyed gently with the loosened masses of bright waving hair.

"Who is that?" she asked suddenly, pointing to a tall figure striding up the avenue toward the Hall.

A spray of roses prevented me from seeing him for a moment; but, on pushing it hastily aside, I saw that it was Lord Saxon.

"Who is that?" repeated Lady Jesmond. "What a splendid man!" Her face flushed, and her eyes shone with a brightness such as I had not seen in them before. "Felicia, how slow you are! Who is he?" she cried.

But my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth, and in vain I tried to give utterance to his name.

"I have seen many handsome men," she said, "but never one like him."

I shall never forget the expression of suppressed emotion on her face as she watched him.

"Do you know him? Who is he?" she repeated.

"It is Lord Saxon," I answered.

"Lord Saxon of Dunroon? You do not mean to say that is Lady Saxon's son? I was just beginning to hate the very sound of his name, for she never seems to speak of any one else; but, if that is her son, I at once abjure my dislike, and will listen all day long while she talks of him."

I heard the sound of footsteps, and a servant's voice announced—

"Lord Saxon."

I turned quickly, and, in doing so, I saw his first look at her. I saw how his eyes flashed, I saw the gleam of admiration that he could not control, and I knew that his beauty-loving nature was taken captive by her loveliness.

He looked at her in silence for a few moments; and then with difficulty, as I could see, he withdrew his eyes from her and looked at me.

"Miss Gordon," he said, "I am glad to see you again."

But oh, Heaven, something was missing from his voice that I might never hear again! It was not the tender voice that had whispered "Felicia" when we stood on the lawn on that memorable moonlit night.

I held out my hand to him, but my heart was too full for my lips to give utterance to words. Lord Saxon murmured something to me; I was conscious only that he desired an introduction.

Briefly I introduced Lord Saxon to Lady Jesmond.

He spoke first, and she listened as with charmed ears; and, as she responded to his greeting, his eyes seemed riveted by the fair loveliness of her face. He stood like one fascinated, unconscious of everything around him but the dazzling brilliancy of Gabrielle, Lady Jesmond.

CHAPTER XII.

An hour passed, and still the conversation was kept up with unflagging interest. All Lady Jesmond's powers of fascination were brought into play. Once or twice his lordship turned to me with some commonplace remark, and then at one bright smile from her he instantly forgot me. We were still out on the balcony, Lord Saxon seated by her side, whilst I stood gazing at the roses with a faint sad heart. What had happened that the light seemed to have left the sun and the fragrance to have fled from the flowers?

Lord Saxon was "a lover of beauty and a dreamer of dreams" I knew it—and, now that he had met with a woman of surpassing loveliness, he would worship at her shrine. Why need I mind? With a smile on my face I stood there whilst my heart was slowly breaking; for I knew, just as well as if they had disclosed their thoughts, that a passionate mutual love was burning in their hearts. He could never have loved me; it had been but a passing fancy. This woman had stormed his heart with her beauty, and he had surrendered.

When the feeling of pain had somewhat moderated, I heard what they were saying.

"Not ride!" cried Lord Saxon. "I thought all ladies rode in India!"

"I was an exception," she said. "It is the one accomplishment above all others that I miss."

"Let me teach you," he begged eagerly.

"You would not like the trouble," she said coquettishly.

"Trouble!" he repeated. "Why, it would give me the greatest pleasure and delight!"

"We will speak of it later," she said.

Then came an interruption, in the shape of a message from the nursery, saying that Mrs. Rivers would be glad if Lady Jesmond would go there at once, as Sir Guy did not seem well.

Nello and I were left on the balcony alone. Had he come to talk to me of the silvery moon and the nightingales' song? Alas, alas, his eyes followed Lady Jesmond, and, when she had vanished from his sight, he stood with a dreamy, musing smile on his lips!

"He is a dreamer of dreams," I said to myself, whilst a bitter pain seized my heart; "and now they are of her, not of me."

"Felicia," he said, turning to me, "I cannot tell you how grieved and distressed I am at your sudden reversal of fortune. I could hardly believe my eyes when I read my mother's letter, and found that Jesmond Dene was no longer yours. Do you feel the loss greatly?"

His words were kind enough, but the very kindness was as a dagger thrust into my heart; it showed me how completely his love was dead.

The loss of Jesmond Dene was so trifling to me in comparison with this other and greater loss that I could have laughed at the question; but I answered it soberly enough.

"I feel it most deeply; but I do not resent it. I loved my cousin Paul, and I am glad that his son will have the estate."

"You are very noble and very good," he said. "I have thought a great deal about it, and I cannot express to you how glad I am to see you carry such a brave heart, Felicia. Have you decided yet what you will do?"

I could have cried out in my anguish that I had hoped, had thought that he was coming to settle my future for me; but I shrouded myself in a mantle of pride. If his love for me was so weak that it had died at sight of a fairer face, what had it been worth?

I told him that I had decided on nothing—that for the

present I should remain with Lady Jesmond, as she had asked me; also that my aunt was too ill to be removed.

"I should like to see your cousin Paul's little son," he said. "Certainly his widow is the most beautiful woman I ever seen."

"And you worship beauty," I remarked bitterly.

How deaf he was to the anguish that rang in my voice! He laughed frankly, apparently unaware of the pain he had caused me.

"So my mother said, Felicia; and I am afraid it is true. But I want to talk to you of yourself."

When Lady Jesmond returned to the room, laughing at the nurse's anxiety and unnecessary alarm, he immediately left me; and the next moment I heard him beseeching Lady Jesmond to drive over to Dunroon.

"I should like to show you the place" he said. "Felicia will drive over with you."

"I will think about it," answered Lady Jesmond. "I never make hurried promises."

"Felicia," cried Lord Saxon, "you will bring Lady Jesmond over to Dunroon?"

"When she likes to go."

And then Lord Saxon rose to depart. He must really go, he said; he had stayed much longer than he ought. But even after that declaration he lingered, talking to her, and watching her every movement with admiring eyes.

So this was the prosaic end of my love story! Had he cared for me? I could not tell; but I believed he had, or he would not have kissed me. He had loved me with a feeble apology for love which had died when he saw the fair face of Lady Jesmond. I had tasted happiness but to lose it; I had dreamed my love-dream but to wake and find it vanished. I had been unspeakably happy for a few days, and now, without any warning, the cup of happiness had been dashed from my lips, the blissful delusion had been dispelled.

When Lord Saxon had gone, Lady Jesmond turned to me.

"Felicia," she cried, "you are a greater mystery than ever to me. Imagine knowing such a man as that, and never speaking of him! You must be as unimpressionable as marble."

"You never liked Lady Saxon," I made excuse.

"It did not follow that I should not like her son," she said, and then added, "I have a presentiment that I shall become his wife."

"You must wait until he asks you," I ventured to suggest.

"Yes; and I can make him ask me whenever I like," she said laughingly. "Why, Felicia, did you not see?"

"See what?" I asked impatiently.

"Why, that he was in love with me from the first moment that we met! I feel it; I am sure of it. And, Felicia, Felicia, I am afraid my own case is like his! He is the first man I have seen whom I should care to love or marry."

"You forget Paul," I said, shocked at her words.

"I do not forget him. But, Felicia, why did you never speak to me of Lord Saxon?"

"How could I tell that the topic would interest you?" I asked.

"You might have been sure, knowing what a superior man he is. Now I shall cultivate his mother's friendship; and, Felicia, you will take me to Dunroon?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A YEAR passed, and to me it was one of slow torturing agony. My strength deserted me, the color faded from my cheeks, the light from my eyes, but I kept my secret. No one, except perhaps Lady Saxon, had the faintest idea that I had ever cared for the handsome lord of Dunroon.

It was impossible for me not to watch Nello and Lady Jesmond as they sauntered amid the trees and flowers, her bright lovely face and golden hair contrasting with his dark, proud, manly beauty. Never was lover more devoted than Lord Saxon. He came every day, sometimes twice; and I could hear his voice calling "Gabrielle, Gabrielle!" as he sought for her in the grounds. He was proud of her love, and he gloried in her brilliant beauty. If by any chance he came when she was engaged or absent, he would pour out all his passionate loving thoughts of her to me. Lashings from

a fiery whip could not have stung me more; but I listened with a smile on my lips, though every word lacerated my heart. As for Lady Jesmond, she gave herself up completely to her love-dream.

"I talked of ambition once," she said to me; "I never could have had any. I would marry Lord Saxon if he were a peasant instead of a prince, as he is."

"Do you love him so much?" I asked.

"Love him," she exclaimed, with a warm glow on her face—"love him? That is a weak expression, Felicia. It is something deeper and stronger than simple love. I always knew," she continued, "that if ever I loved at all, it would be in terrible earnest. I wish I had more moderation and greater self-control."

They were acknowledged lovers when she spoke in that enthusiastic fashion; but no time had been settled for the marriage. My aunt Annette was still lying ill, and Lady Saxon was miserable.

"I do not like Lady Jesmond," she said to me one day when we were alone; "I have never liked her, and I never shall. I do not trust her. There is something strange and mysterious in her manner which repels even more than her glittering loveliness. I am anxious that my son should be happy; but I wish he had chosen differently," she concluded, with a sigh.

I could not help noting that there were times when Lady Jesmond seemed unhappy, when she was restless and uneasy, started at the least sound, grew pale when she heard an unusual noise. I found her at intervals with her face clouded with thought, and her bright blue eyes shadowed. It struck me that she spent too much more time with Mrs. Rivers than she had hitherto done. They were in constant and close companionship, always talking eagerly, earnestly, and in whispers. Two other things struck me as extremely singular—how little thought Lady Jesmond bestowed upon her dead husband and how little love she showed for her child. All her interest centered in Lord Saxon.

The month of June had come round again, and still I was an inmate of Jesmond Dene. I could not leave, first because I had solemnly promised to remain for a time, and secondly because my aunt Annette, who was lying ill with a spinal complaint, could hardly endure my being out of her presence,

All nature smiled in the summer sun, and the nightingales once again awoke the echoes of the night with their melodious song.

At the close of a sultry day, when the moon was shining over the trees, I went quietly to hear the nightingales, as I had once gone with Nello. Bitter were my thoughts, hot and bitter were my tears. She had taken him from me, this beautiful woman whose little son had deprived me of my inheritance.

It was a luxury to be alone, to pour forth unrestrainedly the agony of my heart, to crouch down on the long soft grass and sob out my grief. They were singing so exquisitely, the nightingales, and yet the sweet music seemed to tear my very heart. He would have loved me and married me but for her! Heaven forgive me—in that moment I hated her! Ah, if she had but remained in India—if my cousin Paul had but lived! And the plaint of Bianca among the nightingales came home to me.

"She had not reached him at my heart
With her fine tongue, as snakes indeed
Kill flies; nor had I, for my part,
Yearned after, in my desperate need,
And followed him, as he did her,
To coasts left bitter by the tide,
Whose very nightingales, elsewhere
Delighting, torture and deride;
For still they sing, the nightingales.

"I would not for her white and pink,
Though such he likes, her grace of limb,
Though such he has praised, nor yet I think
For life itself, though spent with him,
Commit such sacrilege, affront
God's nature, which is love, intrude
'Twixt two affianced souls. and hunt
Like spiders in the altar wood
I cannot bear those nightingales!

"If she chose sin, some gentler guise
She might have sinned in, so it seems.
She might have pricked out both my eyes,
And I still seen him in my dreams,
Or drugged me in my soup or wine,
Nor left me angry afterward.
To die here with his hand in mine,
His breath upon me, were not hard.
Our Lady, hush those nightingales!

" . . . . . Sing they so,
And you be silent? Do I speak.
And you not hear? An arm you throw
Round some one, and I feel so weak.
Oh, owl-like birds! They sing for spite,
They sing for hate, they sing for doom;
They'll sing through death who sing through night,
The'll sing and stun me in the tomb—
The nightingales, the nightingales!"

In the madness of my despair I realized how much I had loved him. He would be standing now on the balcony with her; he would be worshiping the beauty of her fair face, his arm encircling her waist, and he would kiss her lovely lips. And I was lying there, lonely, desolate, and broken-hearted! Was it just? I cried to the silent shining heavens. She had everything, she had had the trusting love of my bright young cousin; she was the mother of his heir; she was mistress of the home that had been mine; she had money, lands; and now she had taken him! Was it fair, because she had the brightness of the stars in her eyes and the sheen of the sun in her hair, that she should take him from me? Was it fair that she should stand in the circle of his arm, and I lie forsaken there? Was it fair that she should take his caresses and his kisses while I stretched out my arms to the empty air?

CHAPTER XIV.

THERE was a surprise in store for me when I returned from my dismal ramble. I found that Lord Saxon had remained rather later than usual, and that Lady Jesmond had discarded her widow's weeds. Never shall I forget the vision of loveliness that met my dazed eyes. She wore a dress of pale violet velvet, which contrasted well with her golden tresses and exquisite complexion. I had seen, not many days before, Lord Saxon take the little crape cap from her head, and all her shining hair fall in a glorious mass of ripples and waves about her shapely shoulders.

"It is more than a sin to cover such hair," he said.

She looked up to him with sudden gravity.

"I hope," she answered calmly, "that I shall never commit a greater."

"I do not think you could commit a sin if you tried," he said, his eyes looking into hers with deep yearning love; and, to my surprise, instead of smiling, her gravity deepened.

The remembrance of her dazzling beauty of that evening will never leave me. I remember, too, how she sung to him, and how he leaned admiringly over her chair and drank in the music of her sweet voice; and then they went out on to the balcony, where he bade her good-night, bending down and kissing her lips, and breathing passionate words into her ears which seemed to stir her into new life.

Then he was gone; and she stood gazing after him with a smile sweet and tender, such as I had seldom seen on her face before.

We stood together once more; her face was full of emotion, her eyes were full of tears of joy.

"I will be a good woman my whole life long," she said suddenly, "I will be as good as woman can be; for, oh, Felicia, I am so happy—I am so unutterably happy! Do you know what has happened?"

"No," I answered faintly; but my heart told me what was coming.

Two warm soft arms were placed round my neck, a golden head nestled on my bosom, a fair bewitching face was turned to mine, tears shone in the blue eyes.

"Listen to me, Felicia," she said. "I am the happiest woman in the whole wide world. Oh, I will be good—I will indeed be good!"

"But you are good now, Gabrielle," I said, anxious only to avert the coming announcement.

"I will be better!" she cried. "Oh, Felicia, I do not deserve to be so happy!"

The white arms tightened their clasp and the beautiful head nestled more closely to me.

"I shall remember to-day above all other days," she said; "it is the happiest of my life. Felicia, I am shy at telling you my good news. Lord Saxon has asked me to be his wife, and wishes me to marry him this summer."

There was a dead silence as her voice died away; the smile on her face was full of unutterable content.

The blow which I had so long expected had at last fallen.

I must go away, far away, where I could never hear of or see either of them again!

"This summer," she repeated; "and, now that my happiness is so near, I—I am afraid of it—afraid!" she repeated, raising her face and kissing me. "Can you say anything that will give me courage?"

"You have nothing to fear," I said, with difficulty.

"Is it colder than usual to-night?" she asked. "The air is sweet with roses, but it seems to me chill;" and I felt a shudder pass over the graceful figure. "I wish," she added, with sudden melancholy, "that I had my life to begin over again. All people make grave mistakes at one time or another in their lives, do they not?"

"Very many do," I replied—who had made a greater one than I? "But surely you are not among the number, Gabrielle—you can have made no mistake in your life?"

"She looked at me with wistful longing eyes.

"I did not know," she said, "that pure love brought so much with it. I find the first thing is a craving to be worthy of it."

"I hope you are worthy of it," I answered gravely. Her curious words and manner began to make me feel anxious.

"I will try to be," she said. "Felicia," she continued, drawing my face down to hers and kissing it again, "you have known Nello longer than I have; do you think, if he loved any one very much, and found out that she he loved had done a great wrong, he would forgive readily?"

"It would depend altogether on the nature of the wrong committed," I replied. "I should imagine that he would be ready to overlook ordinary faults and weaknesses; but there are some things that he would never pardon."

"What are they?" she asked breathlessly.

"He hates trickery and deceit," I answered. "He would, I believe, almost forgive murder sooner than anything of that nature."

She was looking at me with wide-opened frightened eyes.

"He would sooner forgive murder than deceit!" she echoed.

The words had a strange sound as she uttered them, and made a lasting impression upon me.

"I am sure it is cold," she remarked, after a pause; and once again she shuddered.

She began to pace up and down the long drawing-room.

"You will think that I am behaving strangely to-night," she said, "I am uneasy; I cannot rest."

I attempted to go, but she cried out, "Felicia, do not leave me!"

"It is strange," she said presently, with rare humility, "that out of all the world of women Nello should have chosen me."

"I do not think so," I replied quickly. "He loves you because you are one of the most beautiful."

She looked sad and disappointed.

"Do you think it is only for my beauty that he loves me?" she asked.

"Would not that content you?" I inquired.

"Not now," she answered slowly. "It would once; it will not satisfy me now. Love has opened my eyes to a hundred things I did not know before."

"You really do not seem to have loved my cousin," I was startled into saying.

"No," she replied—and her eyes filled with tears—"I did not love Paul—not in this fashion, at least."

They I advised her to go to rest. Her face was burning, her eyes were shining with a strange light, her golden hair had fallen over her shoulders in careless profusion. Never was vision of womanhood so fair!

"I am so loath to see the happiest day of my life come to an end," she said, "that I feel compelled to linger here. Felicia, have you ever had what people call a presentiment?"

"Yes, often," I answered.

"Have they been realized?" she asked.

"More often than not," I replied.

"I have a presentiment to night—a feeling that tells me to-morrow will not be like to-day."

"You will be happier than ever to-morrow," I said. "Lord Saxon will come over to Jesmond Dene quite early, and he will want to drive you or ride with you to one of your favorite haunts. Then you will romp on the staircase with little Guy; you will go off in excellent spirits; and you will have quite forgotten your presentiment when you return."

"Good-night, Felicia," she said; "you have comforted me."

I kissed her, and said "Good-night."

When I awoke the next morning, my first thought was that I must go from Jesmond Dene. I could not bear to remain in the place that had seen my hopes crushed and my love ruthlessly blasted.

Just as I had prophesied, Lord Saxon came over quite early, as he wanted to drive Lady Jesmond to St. Michael's Priory, a fine ruin about ten miles distant.

"A whole day, my darling, out in the sunshine together!" I heard him say.

They went to the nursery, whence I heard issue shrill peals of sweet childish laughter. I went after them with a message for Lady Jesmond. Lord Saxon was tossing the child in his arms, delighting and frightening him at the same time. Lady Jesmond was speaking to the nurse at the other end of the room, and again I caught the words, "Be careful, Gabrielle;" and once more I wondered why the nurse should presume so to address her mistress.

Nello and Lady Jesmond rode away together, and there was no shadow on her lovely laughing face as she wished me a pleasant "Good-morning."

CHAPTER XV.

THE clock was striking twelve when the footman brought me a card, with the announcement that the visitor had asked for Lady Jesmond, but that, on being told that she was from home, he had requested to see me.

Taking up the card, I read the name of Major Esmond; and I remembered that Gabrielle was living in his family, teaching his children, when she first met Paul.

I hastened from my seat on the lawn to the drawing-room and there found a fine, tall, soldierly man awaiting me.

"I presume I have the pleasure of seeing Miss Gordon," he said, as he rose and bowed, "whom I already know well by report? I called on Mr. Benson as I passed through London, and he spoke much of you. I am Major Esmond. Lady Jesmond was living in my house when she met your cousin Paul.

I replied that we had often spoken of those days, and that, although Lady Jesmond was not just then at home, I felt sure she would welcome him most cordially to Jesmond Dene. I invited him to partake of some refreshment; and, as he drank a glass of sherry, he told me what had brought him home.

"I have but six months' leave of absence," he said, "and I had some difficulty in getting that; but we have had a lawsuit in our family which has lasted sixteen years, and I have just won it. I was compelled to come to England to settle affairs; and before I left India my wife, who was warmly attached to Miss Fairfax, now Lady Jesmond, begged me run down to Jesmond Dene to see her. I ought to have written; but, finding myself with two days to spare, I decided to come down unannounced. How is Lady Jesmond?"

"She is exceedingly well," I answered.

"I am glad of that. She was very delicate when she left India; her husband's death was a terrible blow to her."

I thought to myself that she must have changed greatly if sorrow for Paul's death had made her ill.

"It was only natural," I said.

"She was always very delicate—indeed some of us thought she would not stand the voyage," said the major earnestly.

"In what way was she delicate?" I asked wonderingly, for Lady Jesmond had always seemed to me the very personification of health and strength.

"She seemed to be consumptive," he replied; "but I am delighted to hear that she is better.

"I have never seen or known her anything but perfectly well and robust." And he repeated that he was very glad to hear it.

"Miss Fairfax was in delicate health the whole time she lived with us," continued the major. "Mrs. Esmond was always more or less anxious about her. She will be pleased to hear of her perfect recovery. And how is little Sir Guy?"

I told him how well the boy was progressing, and what a pet he was; how every one loved and indulged him. I told him too what a devoted nurse he had; and the major appeared thoroughly delighted to hear such excellent news.

"We were very much attached to Miss Fairfax," he continued. "My children loved her as though she was one of the family. She was as good as she was beautiful."

Again the old familiar phrase that had puzzled me so often! I should certainly not have described Gabrielle as being as good as she was fair.

"I have never seen any one so perfectly patient as she was," he went on.

"Patience is the very last virtue I should attribute to Lady Jesmond," I remarked, with a smile.

"You surprise me!" he said, with a pleasant laugh. Then, changing the subject, he added, "What a magnificent place this is, Miss Gordon! I had no idea that I should find it so large."

"Lady Jesmond was greatly surprised when she first came."

"Was she very much pleased?" he asked.

"Yes—delighted," I answered.

"I am glad to hear that," said the kind-hearted soldier. "I was afraid she would never take an interest in anything again. Hers was so entirely a love match."

I thought of her words—"Marriage provided an easy escape from the slavery of teaching; besides which, I liked the idea of being Lady Jesmond." Evidently the major and myself viewed the beautiful Gabrielle's character from very different stand-points.

I ordered luncheon for Major Esmond, and then left him to rest, promising to bring Lady Jesmond to him directly she returned.

After luncheon the major fell asleep, and I went to sit with aunt Annette for an hour or two.

Then it occurred to me that he would probably like some coffee. It was just four o'clock when I entered the drawing-room, where he sat, to ask him. He looked the picture of comfort, with newspapers and magazines scattered on the table near him.

"If I have a weakness," said the major, "it is for coffee. I shall be delighted to take a cup."

In my own mind I had decided that Lord Saxon and Gabrielle would return about five, in time to rest and dress for dinner. "A whole day in the sunshine, my darling," he had whispered; and I therefore felt sure they would not hasten to return.

Suddenly, just as I was inquiring whether the major would take milk and sugar with his coffee, I heard the sound of

their voices. They had returned by what we called the road, and had passed into the courtyard instead of riding up the drive. They walked together toward the drawing-room windows, which were wide open.

She came on, talking and laughing gayly, to her doom. His arm was thrown lightly round her, after his usual caressing fashion, and her beautiful face, wreathed in smiles, was raised to his.

"Lady Jesmond has returned," I said to the major.

His face brightened perceptibly at the words.

Just at that moment her ladyship and Lord Saxon came to the long open glass doors, and entered the room.

The major rose and bowed as he glanced at the beautiful woman, but there was no sign of recognition between them.

I looked at her, expecting her to welcome affectionately one who had been so devoted a friend to her and Paul. As she did not move, I went to her.

"Gabrielle," I said, "your old friend Major Esmond is on leave of absence, and has come to see you."

Then I drew back in fear and trembling, for I saw that there was something terribly wrong. Her face grew colorless while the light seemed suddenly to fade from her eyes, and a startled fear to take possession of her. I pray Heaven that I may never again witness such torture as I read on that woman's face.

She did not look at the major. Her eyes sought Lord Saxon, and rested piteously on his handsome face. The major seemed confused and uncomfortable.

"I am very sorry," he said hesitatingly; "I am afraid that I have made some mistake. It was Lady Jesmond, my old friend Gabrielle Fairfax, the widow of Captain Paul Jesmond, whom I called to see."

She raised her head with desperate courage, and looked into his face. There was a certain pathetic dignity in her manner as her eyes met his.

"I am Lady Jesmond," she said proudly.

"I beg your pardon, madam," returned the major. "I am convinced there is a great mistake somewhere. You are not the Mrs. Paul Desmond I had the honor of knowing in India."

"I am Lady Jesmond," she repeated; but the color did not return to her lips, nor the light to her eyes.

"You are not the widow of the late Captain Jesmond," he said.

"I am the widow of Paul Jesmond," she replied.

"You are not the mother of the child who left India in his own mother's arms!" he cried; and this time his face flushed with impatience, as he looked at the woman standing like a statue before him.

"I am the mother of little Guy," she answered.

"I swear before Heaven that you are not the same Gabrielle Fairfax who lived in my house!" he cried.

She paused a moment, then answered—

"I am Gabrielle Fairfax."

"You are not!" contradicted the major warmly. "Who you are, madam, is best known to yourself, and does not concern me; but you are not Gabrielle Fairfax, the young lady who lived in my house, who taught my children, who married Paul Jesmond, and whom I myself gave away at the altar. Emphatically and most certainly you are not she- You might as well try to make me believe that I am the Viceroy of India."

"You may be for all I know to the contrary," she said, with simulated pride and contempt.

"I can bring hundreds of people to prove that I am Major Esmond. I do not think, madam, that you will find one who can give truthful testimony to the fact that you are Lady Jesmond."

And then, seeing that her face grew paler, and that she trembled violently, Lord Saxon went to her. She held out her arms to him, as though he were her only rock of refuge, and he clasped her to his breast with a passionate cry.

"What is it, my darling?" he said. "I do not understand. Tell me what is wrong."

She rose slowly from his circling arms, and pointed to Major Esmond.

"Nello," she exclaimed, "that man has insulted me! He is mad!"

The major seemed rather relieved to have a man to deal with, and when these words fell from her turned impatiently to Lord Saxon.

"I am sane enough," he said; "but, mad or sane, I persist in denying that that lady is Gabrielle Fairfax or Lady Jesmond."

CHAPTER XVI.

MAJOR ESMOND, who had at first seemed anxious and distressed, now stood erect and at ease, evidently with the consciousness of one who had suddenly realized that he was to be the means of exposing what at present looked like a gigantic fraud. The smile which had rested on his handsome face was no longer there; a stern grave expression had taken its place. Lord Saxon looked perplexed and bewildered, but his face was full of love and tenderness, and turned always toward the woman beside him.

No idea that she could be an impostor had ever occurred to me—indeed the frank and open way in which she had spoken of her past life, of her marriage, of my cousin Paul, of the fact that she had never been in love until now, seemed to me guarantees of her identity and honesty. But there was fear in the agonized face now raised beseechingly to her lover—startled, terrible fear; and, if she were innocent, why need she tremble at the visit of one who had acted as a father toward her?

Lord Saxon, drawing her nearer to him, turned angaily to Major Esmond.

"This lady," he said, "is soon to become my wife; anything you may have to say against her or about her will be my affair, not hers."

"With all the pleasure in the world," rejoined Major Esmond. "I have nothing to say against the lady—how could I when this is the first time I have seen her? How could I, either, say anything about her when she is an entire stranger to me?"

"You deny her identity!" cried Lord Saxon.

"I do not indeed. I simply affirm and repeat that this lady is not Gabrielle Fairfax, who lived as governess in my house. I seem," continued the major, "to have hit upon some family secret or mystery of which I know nothing. The case seems simple enough to me. The young lady whom I seek lived in my house, where she was treated with the utmost

kindness and affection. We were present at her marriage; we had the same warm feeling for her afterward. When I was returning to England, my wife's first request was that I should call upon Gabrielle Fairfax, now Lady Jesmond. At some inconvenience to myself I came hither, desiring to see the young girl I had befriended and helped. I find brought to me as Lady Jesmond a total stranger—a beautiful woman, but a total stranger to me—and you are angry because I speak out and say so. I am sorry I came. I wish I had been a thousand miles away; but, being here, I must speak the truth. This lady who calls herself Lady Jesmond is not the Gabrielle Fairfax who lived with us. Our Gabrielle Fairfax," he continued, "was a fragile delicate girl with a fair angelic face which had a consumptive look. Her eyes were gray, and her hair was more brown than golden. I swear before Heaven that this lady is not the bride whom I gave away to be Paul Jesmond's wife. You doubt me," said the major, looking toward Lord Saxon. "I can give you positive proof of the truth of what I say." Then he looked round upon us, as if specially to engage our attention. "Listen.—I can give you overwhelming proof that this lady is not Gabrielle Fairfax. You know —all my friends know—that Miss Fairfax lived in my house for two years; it is also well known that I gave her away at her marriage, Now I appeal to you, Miss Gordon, and to you, Lord Saxon, to take note of this—not only did I utterly fail to recognize Lady Jesmond when she entered the room, but she also failed to recognize me. Was it not so? I appeal to you both. Did she recognize me?"

We were compelled to answer "No."

"The Gabrielle Fairfax who left my house in tears because she loved us all so well would have come to me as a daughter, would have taken my hands in affectionate greeting, would have bidden me a hundred times welcome to her home. If this be Lady Jesmond, why did she meet me in silence and without recognition? There is no answer to the question; there can be none. One of two things must be clear to you, Miss Gordon, and to you, Lord Saxon. Either I am not Major Esmond, or this lady is not Gabrielle Fairfax. Now I am prepared to prove my identity. To begin—I am personally well known to the commander-in-chief and to many of the officials at the Horse Guards; and I can bring more than a hundred gentlemen, all men of position, to prove that

I am Major Esmond. I will wait here, if you wish it, until more than sufficient evidence is brought forward to prove it. Wnen it is conclusively proved, it will be for you to find out who this lady is whom you have received as Lady Jesmond."

Lord Saxon looked at me with fear and dismay depicted on his face. His eyes sought mine with a horrible questioning in them.

"I received Lady Jesmond," I said; "and I have never had the least doubt as to her identity. She came here with her infant son, and at once took up her position as mistress of Jesmond Dene. Mr. Benson, too," I added, "was fully satisfied as to the validity and genuineness of her claim."

"I am sorry I should be the means of creating so much unpleasantness," returned the major; "but justice should be done. The lady will pardon me perhaps if I ask her a few questions. What, for instance, were the names of my three children?"

She made no answer, but clung more closely to her lover.

"Can you tell me one detail of the wedding—where it took place—the name of the clergyman who married you? Can you describe the dress you wore? What happened just as we were leaving the church?"

Again she did not reply, but flung her arms round her lover's neck, crying despairingly—

"Oh, Nello, Nello!"

"I do not think," said the major quietly, "that there is any need to prolong this painful scene. I will relieve you of my presence, and then the lady may be inclined to throw some light upon the matter." Then, turning to me, he said, "I thank you, Miss Gordon, for your kindness and hospitality. I should have been very glad to help you to solve the mystery; but perhaps you will let me hear the solution before I leave England. I need hardly add that you may rely upon my silence."

"Stay!" cried Lord Saxon. "You must not leave us in this suspense."

"There is no suspense," rejoined the major. "You may take it as an established fact that that lady is not Lady Jesmond." Then, as if suddenly remembering something, he added quickly. "I can give you another and what ought to be an overwhelming proof of what I say. I had forgotten it until

just this moment. The clergyman who married Gabrielle Fairfax and Captain Jesmond is now in London. He was sent home on the sick-list, and arrived in England last month. The proper and most satisfactory course would be to telegraph for him. I can give you his address. He is a friend of mine, and he knew Miss Fairfax. Let him come, and we will abide by his decision."

"Oh, Nello, Nello," cried the unhappy girl, "not that, not that!"

"Shall it be so, my darling?" asked his lordship. "If this clergyman can prove that the major is wrong and you are right, by all means let him come."

But she clung to him, weeping passionate tears, and cried—

"Not that! Oh, Nello, Nello, that!"

"Will you not see him?" asked Lord Saxon gently.

"No, no—a thousand times no!" she cried.

"Tell me why you will not see him, Gabrielle," he said, gazing on the face he loved so well. "If he, by seeing you for a moment, can disprove what the major asserts, and prove your truth, why not see him?"

"Yes," put in the major quietly, "why not see him?"

"Say 'Yes,' Gabrielle," said her lover, "It is an easy way of meeting the difficulty. Do you not see, my darling, that if you refuse this test it will look like guilt?"

But his entreaties were all in vain.

"No man," said the major, "ever found himself in such a painful position, I do believe; yet, if there has been a fraud, it should be exposed."

"Do not use the word 'fraud' in connection with this lady!" cried Lord Saxon, with a darkening face.

"I have no wish to do so; but, if she is not Lady Jesmond, is she not guilty of a most wicked fraud, one that no honest man could ever tolerate or forgive?"

"Nello, Nello!" cried Lady Jesmond; and the drooping figure nearly slipped from his clasp, while the colorless face dropped heavily upon his breast.

"I believe," he cried, turning with hot anger to the major, "that you have killed her!"

"It is not I who have killed her," said the major gravely. "I am merely the instrument by which a cruel wrong has been found out."

Lord Saxon laid the beautiful unconscious figure on the couch.

"Come to her, Felicia," he cried excitedly; "she is in a dead swoon!"

Major Esmond turned to Lord Saxon and looked straight into his face.

"It is natural," he said, "that, loving this lady, you should espouse her cause; but your prejudice should not blind you to the claims of simple justice. Miss Gordon is bound to give up all in favor of the true Lady Jesmond, but not to a fraudulent stranger. I should like to see the child," he continued, as if expecting that the fraud had extended even to the substitution of another child for Paul's.

I rang the bell, standing before Lady Jesmond to screen her from observation, and told the servant who appeared to tell Mrs. Rivers to bring down little Sir Guy to the drawing-room without delay.

"It is hardly a scene for a servant to witness," said the major.

But I assured him that the nurse was a confidential servant whom Lady Jesmond trusted implicitly.

I shall never forget Mrs. Rivers's face when she entered the room. She looked from one to another with wild questioning eyes, and an anticipation of coming danger seemed to come to her.

Major Esmond took the child from her arms and looked critically at the boy's pretty features.

"I know not," he said, after a pause, "where the mother may be, but this is certainly Paul Jesmond's child."

"What is the matter?" cried Mrs. Rivers. "What is wrong?"

And on her face I noticed the same deadly fear and dismay that had taken possession of Lady Jesmond.

CHAPTER XVII.

"WHAT is wrong?" repeated the nurse. "Oh, tell me, for Heaven's sake!"

"She may be able to throw some light on the mystery," said the major. "She came here with the lady, and, as you

say she is a confidential servant, I should most certainly tell her what has occurred."

"We do not know what is wrong yet," I said, answering Mrs. Rivers. "This is the gentleman—Major Esmond—in whose house Miss Gabrielle Fairfax lived in India, and he has come to see her. He declares this lady to be a stranger to him, and not Lady Jesmond at all."

The woman's face, as she listened, assumed a livid pallor, and a fierce gleam shone in her dark eyes.

"Who dares say it?" she cried. "Who dare utter so foul a calumny?"

"I do; I dare," said the major. "That lady is no more Gabrielle Fairfax than you are! I know Gabrielle as well as I do my own children."

The old nurse's face became more ghastly white, and a violent fit of trembling came over her.

"Can you tell us anything which will help to solve the mystery?" asked Lord Saxon.

"There is no mystery, my lord. He speaks falsely—falsely! I have not one word to say. Where is Lady Jesmond?"

"She is here," I said, moving aside. "She has fainted."

With a heart-rending cry the woman sprung forward and knelt down by the side of the apparently lifeless body on the couch. At the sound Lady Jesmond languidly opened her eyes and murmured something which did not reach us.

"Hush, my dear, hush!" cried the nurse; then, turning to us with anger and defiance, she added, "You will kill her between you! Who dares to say she is not Paul Jesmond's widow and the mother of his child?"

"Nello, Nello," cried the faint voice, "I—I will tell you! Send them all away—all away!"

"Hush, hush, my dear!" said Mrs. Rivers. "Lie still!" And again she turned her face to us, as she continued, "She does not know what she is saying. You will drive her mad between you!"

"Send them all away, Nello! I want to tell you—only you!" she cried.

"Take the child to the nursery, Mrs. Rivers," said Lord Saxon.

But the woman refused to go.

"I will not leave her," she declared. "She is not safe with any one but me."

"Go," said the faint weak voice.

And, weeping bitter tears, the nurse obeyed the command of her mistress, and left the room.

"Wait for me in the dining-room, Major Esmond," said Lord Saxon. "I should like to see you again before you go."

"I will," answered the major.

And then, with a slight gesture, Lord Saxon made known to me his wish that I should remain.

"Speak out, Gabrielle," he said. "Of all people in the world, you need fear me the least, because I love you the best. Speak to me fearlessly—tell me all."

"Oh, Nello, Nello, nothing that I can say will make any difference to you—to us?"

But I remarked that he did not answer the question. So did she, for she stretched out her trembling arms to him.

"Nello, I will tell you all."

She rose from the couch, and flung herself imploringly upon her knees at his feet. She caught his hand in hers, and raised her agonized face to his. I pray Heaven I may never witness another such scene. Her golden hair hung like a glittering veil over her shoulders, and her fair loveliness was shadowed by a storm of agonized despair.

"Look at me, Nello!" she cried, with passionate fervor. "Do not turn your eyes from me! You will not love me less when I confess that I am a most miserable sinner. Throw your arms round me, Nello; take me to your breast. I cannot speak when I am so far from you."

But he did not move.

"Nello!" she cried again, and the piteous agony in her voice touched my heart.

"Speak to me freely, Gabrielle," he said. "At present I cannot understand what all this means;" and, as he spoke, he laid his hand on her head.

"I am a miserable sinner," she sobbed, after a momentary pause; "but I did not think of the wickedness of the act. and I was persuaded. I saw the enormity of my crime afterward; but it was too late to withdraw then."

"Tell me," he said—and I noticed the change in his voice—"is what the major said true? Are you Lady Jesmond?"

"No," she answered, "I am not. Oh, forgive me, Nello, forgive me! If I had known that I should see you and love you, I would never have done it. Oh, forgive me!"

"Will you tell me who you are?" he asked gently, but firmly.

"I am Lady Jesmond's sister," she replied. "My name is Alice, not Gabrielle." She must have caught sight of his face then, for her voice died in a wail of deep despair. "You must forgive me, Nello, you must," she persisted, "or I shall die here at your feet! If I had known that I should meet you, if I had known that the time was coming when I should see you and love you, I would rather have died than be guilty of this sin. Great Heaven, there is no pity in your face, no love in your eyes! Your heart is growing hard and cold toward me. Let me die—let me die!"

She wrenched her hands from his, and flung herself to the ground in a frenzy of madness. I went to her, for I could not bear the sight of her despair.

"Gabrielle," I said, do not weep so bitterly." Then my heart aching with anguish at the sight of the beautiful wreck before me, I turned to him. "Oh, Lord Saxon, be kind to her! She loves you so well, and she is so unhappy. Be hind to her."

"Tell me all," Lord Saxon again requested.

"I cannot," she answered; "my strength fails me Felicia, fetch my mother; she will tell you all."

"Your mother, Gabrielle? She is not here," I said.

"Ah, I forgot you do not know! Mrs. Rivers is my mother."

"Mrs. Rivers your mother!" cried Lord Saxon, in undisguised astonishment. "More deceit, more intrigue! Oh Gabrielle, whom I believed to be true as I found you fair, how could you stoop so low?"

The only answer to this reproach was a moan of despair.

"There is a terrible scene below, Mrs. Rivers," I said, entering the nurse's room. "Will you come down, please? Lady Jesmond wants you."

She seemed to fly rather than walk; and I hastened after her. Ah, the mother's instinct, the mother's love! She thought neither of Lord Saxon nor of me, but went to the girl who lay upon the carpet, crushed and helpless.

"My darling, what is it?" she cried. For a moment the burning face of the unhappy girl appeared through the veil of loosened hair.

"Mother," she said," tell them all! Do not keep one word back—tell them all!"

The nurse looked up with a troubled frightened face.

"You know—" she said.

"We know that this lady is not Lady Jesmond," Lord Saxon broke in, and we also know that you are Mrs. Fairfax."

"It is all discovered then!" she said despairingly. "Oh, my beautiful Alice, it would never have been done but for me—guilty, miserable me!"

She turned to Lord Saxon, and kept her eyes fixed on his face the whole time that she spoke.

"My lord," she went on, "you have judged her already. I read your judgment in your eyes. Suspend it until you have heard what I have to tell."

He bowed.

"I must speak of myself for a few minutes," she said. "My husband was a poor hard-working curate who left me, when he died, with two little daughters, Gabrielle and Alice. We lived at Wavertree; and after his death I supported myself and my children by giving music-lessons there. I say 'supported;' but only Heaven knows the desperate struggle I maintained to bring up my children respectably, I never knew until recently what it was to be free from the pinch of poverty—poverty all the more bitter because it has been what the world in its satire calls 'genteel.' Of all the slow tortures that destroy life genteel poverty is the greatest. You, my lord, who have never known want, who have never felt the pangs of hunger, you do not know the trials that beset those who have to battle fiercely for their daily bread. My children were good and beautiful. They were both clever; and I struggled on until they were old enough to receive educational training. I denied myself food in order that they should have enough to eat. Many a night, my lord, I have lain awake too hungry to sleep; but they knew no hunger, no cold. They were too little then.

"When they grew older, through the good offices of a friend of mine, since dead, I found a home for them in a large boarding-school near Paris, where they both received an excellent education in return for the services they rendered.

"When Gabrielle was about seventeen, she had an offer of a situation in India. A lady going thither wanted a com-

panion who could speak French. My daughter went with her; and afterward she went to live as a governess in the family of Major Esmond. She was very happy there, and often sent me money home. Still my life was a terrible struggle, and few sun-rays illumined my dreary path. I had to rent a comfortable house and dress respectably, or I should have lost all my pupils. Think, then, what news it was to me when I heard that my daughter was to marry the son and heir of Sir William Jesmond, although, as she told me, the marriage was to be kept secret. Still I understood all the advantages that must accrue from it."

She paused for a few minutes. Lord Saxon did not stir; but I saw traces of deep emotion on his face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"You cannot realize," continued Mrs. Fairfax, "what that marriage meant for me; it meant freedom from the horrible grind of poverty, which had already almost crushed the life from me; freedom from the irksome task of teaching for a miserable pittance; a fair provision for the comforts and necessities of life—for I knew that my daughter would care for me. She did. I believe that the first sum of money her husband gave her was sent to me. She told me that she would be able to do more for me after a time; that, when she returned to England, I should cease to work; that she would settle a substantial income on me; and that at last I should have the rest so long withheld from me. Think of my delight at the glowing prospect opened up to me! You cannot realize it, you who have never known want. My daughter begged me to be reticent as to her position and prospects, never to mention her marriage even to my dearest friends; and I never did—not even to poor Alice, her sister lying here, my poor beautiful Alice!"

She bent down and kissed the colorless face half hidden by the trembling hands.

"Not even Alice knew then," she reiterated, as though speaking to herself. "When the little heir was born, my

daughter wrote to me again, and told me of her happiness, adding that the proudest moment of her life would be when she placed her little son in my arms. For I was a good mother to both my girls, Lord Saxon."

He bowed, but did not speak. I was hoping that he would say a few words to comfort her.

"All this time," she went on, "my daughter Alice was in France. She had found an excellent situation there, and things were going better with me. Then came a period of disquiet. Gabrielle had written to me from India to say that her husband was going to Faizabad on some military business, and that he would be absent for three months.

"The next letter that came from her brought the news of his death, and that she was coming home with the little heir to Jesmond Dene. I well remember the words of her letter—

"'I shall come home to you for a few days first, mother; my heart is so completely broken by Paul's death that I could not face Jesmond Dene just yet.'

"She came to Wavertree, bringing with her no servant—only her baby-boy; and on the same day my daughter Alice returned from France. For the first time since they were children, I had them together under my roof. Try to realize the temptation, Lord Saxon, and you, Miss Gordon.

"We were there in my house quite alone. I had no servant, no visitors; few of my pupils came to my home, and none of them knew anything of my daughters. Lady Jesmond, the child in whom all my hopes centered, was taken ill and died quite suddenly. She looked very ill when she came, for the loss of her husband had preyed on her mind and weakened her already debilitated constitution. She had never been strong; she was fragile and delicate—unlike my beautiful Alice, who was always healthy. Poor Gabrielle died of inflammation of the lungs. We called in a doctor; but remembering all she had said about secrecy, I did not mention her name before him; he knew only that she was my daughter. Neither he nor I anticipated a serious termination to her illness, or what was done afterward would have been impossible; but she died quite suddenly in the middle of the night, when Alice and I were in the house alone. I was

terribly distressed because of her loss chiefly, and also because of the complete shattering of all my hopes. The child might live and succeed to Jesmond Dene ; but there would be no provision for me. If my daughter had lived, I should have been well provided for ; but here she was lying dead ! Poverty and work still stared me in the face ; and I was so tired ! An idea—I admit that it was a wicked one—flashed across my mind showing me how I could avert the calamity which threatened my future prospects. No one knew anything about my daughter ; no one knew here in England which was Lady Jesmond and which was Alice Fairfax. Why not ask the living child to take the dead one's place ?

"No one could ever know ; it would hurt no one. A widowed Lady Jesmond was traveling from India ; a widowed Lady Jesmond was expected at Jesmond Dene. They were both my children, and, as it could work no injury to any one, why should not the one pass for the other ?

"I thought it all over carefully, and viewed it in all its bearings. There seemed to me little harm in it ; and I was so tired of poverty, so tired of work ! The only danger I could foresee was the very one that has occurred—the coming home of some one from India who had known Gabrielle there ; but the chances of such a thing happening appeared to me very small. She had known but few people, and those few were not likely to seek her out in England ; and, if they should happen to do so, she could easily evade them. There did not seem to me to be the least danger of my plans being upset in that manner. I pondered the matter in my mind, and then I broached it to Alice.

"At first—believe me, Lord Saxon—she most positively refused to agree to my scheme. She said that it would be false, dishonorable, mean—that she would never consent to such a deception. But I talked to her, and pointed out that, with her beauty and her position as Lady Jesmond, she would be able to make a brilliant marriage. I persuaded her ; let the blame and the punishment fall on me—I deserve it.

'I took my living daughter to the side of the dead one. I drew from my dead child's hand her wedding ring and diamond keeper, and I placed them on Alice's hand.

"'It is Alice Fairfax who lies dead there,' I said : 'and you are Gabrielle, Lady Jesmond. I took the boy and

placed him in her arms. 'Henceforth,' I said to her, 'this is your child.'

"I told the little fellow to call her 'mamma;' but I was much troubled by the look in the child's eyes. If he could have spoken, he would have said plainly, 'This is not my mamma; she has gone away!' But he was too young to understand; nevertheless, whenever he calls Alice 'mamma,' there is a questioning look in his eyes."

I wondered that I had not thought of this before, for I had often heard the cry of the child for his mother and seen his strange inquiring gaze. This confession made clear to me many of the mysterious things I had observed during the past twelve months.

"We had no trouble in successfully carrying on the deception," Mrs. Fairfax continued. "No one suspected what had been done. Alice took possession of Gabrielle's trunks, of her clothes, her jewels, her papers, of the package left by Captain Jesmond to be given to his wife. Who was there to say that she was not Gabrielle, Lady Jesmond? The doctor's certificate was made out in the name of Alice Fairfax, and in Wavertree churchyard the name of Alice Fairfax is engraved on my dead daughter's tombstone.

"But when all was arranged, my daughter grew nervous. 'It is a fraud and a deception,' she declared; and more than once she told me that she had not the courage to carry it through. She consented to represent her sister only on condition that I would come with her and act as nurse to the child. Then, and not until then, did she consent to come. She made me promise that I would live with her always; and we have been very happy. Oh, my beautiful Alice, have I crushed you by my miserable folly?"

Her voice died away in bitter sobs as she knelt by her daughter's side; and she who had for so long been known as Lady Jesmond opened her arms and pillowed the gray head upon her bosom.

"Never mind, mother," she said. "Do not cry so, dear; all will be well yet. Nello will forgive me."

But I knew, from the stern pained expression on his face, that he would never take her to his heart again. He was "a worshiper of beauty, and a dreamer of dreams;" but he was a man who valued honor and integrity, who could not toler-

ate deceit. I knew her doom, poor girl, before he pronounced it.

"You will forgive us both, my lord?" said the weeping mother.

"Your sin was not against me," he replied gravely. "You have wronged Miss Gordon more than you have wronged me."

"Felicia, you will forgive me?" pleaded Alice Fairfax.

I stooped down and kissed the lips that but a few short hours before had been wreathed with smiles.

"I forgive you, dear, with all my heart," I replied.

"You have always been good to me Felicia," she went on, "although I took so much from you."

She did not know—she would never know—all that she had taken, or all that I had lost.

"Felicia has forgiven me," she said, in a trembling voice. "Nello, you will not refuse me pardon?"

"Forgive us, my lord!" sobbed Mrs Fairfax again.

"Not only do I forgive you entirely," said Lord Saxon, "but it shall be my care and my pleasure to provide for your future, Mrs. Fairfax. You shall know want no more."

She turned quickly, and kissed his hand.

"I thank you, my lord," she said gratefully; but her daughter's voice interrupted her further expression of thanks.

"Nello, Nello," cried the unhappy girl, "speak to me—think of me!"

"Will you leave us?" he said to Mrs. Fairfax. "I wish to talk to your daughter for a short time." Then, noting the violence of her grief, he added, "Do not weep so bitterly. It was a great folly—a wretched mistake; but it is too late now to repair it. I can only say this—that your future shall be my care. Leave me with your daughter now."

And, still weeping most bitterly, Mrs. Fairfax left the room.

Lord Saxon walked over to Alice Fairfax, and stood by her side, gravely looking down at the face he had so often smiled upon.

"Alice!" he said. "It seems strange to give you that name."

She looked up to him with eager passionate eyes.

"Shall I never be 'Gabrielle' to you again?" she asked.

"No—never more," he answered gravely. "The name was not yours, and you should not have borne it."

"Oh, Nello, Nello, if you will not forgive me, kill me! I cannot live without you!" she cried.

"It is no question of forgiveness," he said coldly; "my dear, beautiful as you are, and dearly as I love you, we must part."

CHAPTER XIX.

When Alice heard Lord Saxon's words—and they sounded with terrible distinctness in the quiet room—she started with a faint cry, and then fell back white and helpless. After a few moments she stood up, having recoved her composure.

"You cannot mean that, Nello!" she cried. "You cannot leave me; we cannot part! I am your promised wife. Look at me," she continued, in frenzied despair—"look into the face that you have found so fair, and tell me that your love is still mine! You must not leave me to desolation and death! Look at me whom you have professed to love, and whisper your forgiveness. Nello, would you plunge a dagger into my heart?"

"Need you ask, Alice?" he answered.

"Well, you will kill me far more cruelly if you leave me bereft of your love," she said. "Oh, Nello, Nello, if you must send me from you, kill me here and now! I would rather die by your hand than receive life from another."

A simple dignity, such as I had not seen before, came to him now.

"My dear," he said, in gentle yet firm tones, "you must see that it is impossible I can ever marry you. Your beauty took me by storm and I gave you as deep and passionate love as man ever gave to woman. It came to me like a vision of perfect bliss; it died when I found that you had been to me a living lie. I would have married you had you been poor as the beggar-girl whom King Cophetua loved; I would have married you had your beauty been marred by burn or scar. But you have on your soul a stain so horrible to me that your beauty could never hide it from my eyes."

With a cry to Heaven for pity, she again sunk upon the couch, whilst Lord Saxon went on, in a grave sad voice—

"Do not think me harsh—do not think that I judge you

from a pinnacle of self-complacent goodness. I humble myself before Heaven for my many faults and sins while I speak to you. There are transgressions much greater than yours in the eyes of the world which I could more easily have forgiven; but a lie has always been to me the thing most hateful on earth. Had you told me all," he went on, "when I first declared my love for you—had you trusted to my affection, and shown me that, after all, a love of truth reigned in your soul, I would have made you my wife. But the lie you have acted and lived has been found out by another. I never before appreciated," he added, "the moral beauty of a woman. Beauty pales before the grandeur of nobility of soul, even as the twinkling stars are outshone by the sun at noonday."

I could listen to no more, but stood up to defend the beautiful yet unhappy woman who was writhing beneath the words of contempt that he poured forth.

"Do not be so terribly hard, so bitterly cruel, Lord Saxon!" I cried. "You may need mercy yourself some day. If she has sinned, she suffers."

"And I suffer," he returned. "My life is as hopelessly shattered as is hers. I have loved, not a real, but an ideal woman whose soul, I believed, was clear as crystal. The ideal has vanished; and the reality that remains is but the dross of common humanity. Oh, Alice, why, when you knew I loved you—why did you not tell me yourself of the deceit you were practicing? Your honesty in telling me would have gone far toward atoning for your crime. As it is, you have been simply found out."

She rose from the couch and approached Lord Saxon. The pallor of death was on her face. As she flung herself upon her knees at his feet she looked at him with a pathetic yearning in her eyes which I shall never forget to the day of my death.

"Forgive me, Nello," she pleaded—and her voice might have touched a heart of stone—"forgive me! I did wrong and I have suffered throughout the whole period of my deception. Oh, Nello, forgive me, and take me to your heart! I will be such a faithful wife to you—all the more faithful and truthful because I have deceived you. Nello, never again in this world shall my lips open to utter one false word—never again!"

"My dear," he said, "you only torture yourself and me. The soul has gone from my love; there is but the corpse of it left—nothing can reanimate it, I must be able to look up to the woman I take for a wife, to honor and reverence her. How could I reverence you when I know you to have committed a fraud? I will befriend you, I will take care of you; but my love is dead."

"Felicia," she cried, "plead for me! If he leaves me thus, I shall die!" The tears were raining down her face, and her anguish was pitiable to see. "Plead for me, Felicia; he will listen to you."

"Be kinder to her, Lord Saxon," I said. "Do you not see that you are breaking her heart? And, with all her faults, you ought to remember that she has loved you devotedly."

"She has indeed," he answered, with a sad look on his face. "I wish it were all different, for I shall never know happiness again."

She rose and put both her arms round his neck, and whispered words of love to him. She kissed and caressed his face with her little white trembling hands.

"My own love, my dear love. She murmured. You could not, you must not, leave me without your love."

But he was deaf to her entreaties, and the caresses which but a few hours before would have filled him with delight now were repugnant to him.

"I repent," she cried to him—"oh, Nello, I repent so bitterly! Heaven pities a repentant sinner. Cannot you, beloved, forgive this my great sin?"

"I do," he replied. "It is not that. Rest now, and to-morrow we will settle your future and your mother's."

"Apart from you?" she said.

"Yes—apart from me, my dear—quite apart."

"To-morrow, Nello?" she questioned, looking at him with a strange smile. "You will settle my future to-morrow?"

"Yes, my dear," he said. "Now rest."

"To morrow!" She repeated, with the same strange brooding smile on her face. "Kiss me once more, Nello—once more. Forget that my lips have lied to you, and remember only that I have loved you, You are quite sure that nothing can induce you to take me back to your heart again—you are quite sure?"

"I am quite sure," he replied, slowly.

"Kiss me just once again then, and say good-by. Oh, the happy hours that we have spent, the love that has been between us, Nello! Mine was a great fault—a wicked deed; but you must always remember that my repentance was terrible. I see there is no mercy for me. You have none: Heaven will have none. I have finished! But you will say good-by, Nello, and you will always remember my terrible repentance?"

I never saw such yearning love and tenderness as then came into Lord Saxon's face.

Notwithstanding all his shrinking from her, she went up to him again. There was no supplication in her voice now· a quiet resignation had come over her.

"Good-by, Nello!" she said. "My dear lost love, good-by! and then, wringing her hands with a gesture of utter despair, she went from the room.

"Her heart will break," I said. "Oh, Nello, forgive her!"

"Do you not think that my heart is torn with grief and pain?" he asked. "Felicia, I loved her so well that I think I could have forgiven her anything except the base deceit that she has been guilty of."

Then Lord Saxon joined the Major. They were together for half an hour; and, when they were leaving, the Major expressed to me his great sorrow at what had occurred. He added that, in the distressing circumstances, he would not remain in the house; and, as Lord Saxon had asked him to stay at Dunroon, he had decided to accept his hospitality.

They arranged to return to Jesmond Dene on the following afternoon, and meanwhile they would telegraph to Mr. Benson to meet them without delay. Everything was to be done quietly, so as to give Alice as little pain as possible.

"No publicity!" said the Major. "It is an unfortunate business altogether; but we must screen her."

When I had said good-night to them, I repaired at once to aunt Annette's room. I did not tell her anything of what had passed, as I feared it would greatly excite her and probably retard her already slow recovery.

Before retiring for the night, I went to Alice's room and asked if she would like me to stay with her for an hour or two. The answer came in a strange smothered voice—"No," she would rather be alone.

CHAPTER XX.

TOWARD four in the morning she whom I had known as Gabrielle, Lady Jesmond, entered my room. Her face was quite colorless, and her long golden tresses hung loosely over her shoulders; her eyes shone with a light that was almost terrible in its brightness. She came toward me, holding a letter in her hand.

"I could not sleep," she said, "and I have written this. Felicia, you have been kind to me from the first; will you render me a great service?"

"I will if I can," I replied.

"You can if you will. I want you to go this morning, and with your own hands deliver this letter to Lord Saxon. Do not trust it to any servant or friend; give it direct into his own hands."

"He is coming here this afternoon," I told her, thinking that she might then give the letter to him.

"I want him to read it at once. He said he was coming to settle my future to-day; but before he decides upon anything I wish him to read this. Will you take it to him, Felicia, early this morning? You can drive over to see Lady Saxon, and then place it in his hands."

"Do you wish it very much?" I asked, for I did not care for the commission.

"I do with my whole heart," she said. "Take it, Felicia, and promise me that he shall have it before ten o'clock."

I took the letter from her hands and promised to fulfil her wishes. She kissed me, but her face was deathly cold, and a strange wild gleam was in her eyes. She went to the window and drew aside the lace hangings.

"The sun is rising," she said, "and the river is rushing madly onward to the sea."

The faint light of the dawn was on her face as she left my room, and those were the last words she ever uttered to me. I heard her close the door, and hoped fervently that she might rest and sleep.

I did not like the commission; still, as the letter was

evidently of great importance, and I had promised, I went. It was just ten o'clock when I reached Dunroon, and placed it in Lord Saxon's hands. He was surprised to see me so early, and seemed in no mood to read the letter. He opened it at last. As he read his face grew ghastly white, and he staggered back, with his hand pressed to his brow. He stood for some few minutes stunned and bewildered, then thrust the letter into my hands.

"Read, Felicia," he cried—"read quickly, quickly!"

I hurriedly read the loving, despairing, passionate words that were her death-knell—words all blotted with tears—words written in the early dawn of the day of which she was not to see the end. This was the letter—

"You say, Nello, that you are coming to-day to settle my future. Dear, I shall settle it myself. There is no mercy for me; there is none on earth—there will be none perhaps in heaven; I expect none. And yet my fault was not so great, not so terrible. Such as it was, I will expiate it with my life; and the expiation is a greater sin than that for which you have left me. Now that I have known the warmth and sunshine of your love, I cannot live in the cold and the darkness. Better a thousand times to be at rest, with the green grass growing over me, than to live on without happiness, without hope!

"This will be my repentance, Nello. I shall walk out in the early morning to the river, when the sun is shining. You know the reach where two days since you stood on the bank and drew the dripping water-lilies ashore, and I—the happiest woman in the world—stood by your side. It is there that I shall seek rest. This is my repentance, Nello. I shall walk down the path we have so often trodden together, knowing that it is for the last time. As I take my last walk to the river, everything will say good-by to me. Yet I shall not falter. When the chill water kisses my face, when it seizes me and carries me swiftly along, when it washes my hair and bears me, a deadly burden, on its breast, then my repentance will have been accomplished; and, when this letter reaches your hands, she whom you have loved and spurned will be past reproach, beyond recall. Of all that was but yesterday filled with light and gladness there will remain to-day nothing but a dark memory. Nello, my beloved,

I write this on my bended knees, and on this sheet have fallen the most bitter tears woman can ever shed. I lay my last kiss on this paper, for I know that you must touch it. I shall die as I have lived, loving you. When I reach the river's brink, I shall love you; when the chill water—kinder than you, beloved—takes me into its embrace, I shall still love you.

"Long as you live, Nello, my spirit will hover near you. During the sweet summer nights, when the wind is sighing in the trees, you will think of me. When you walk by the river and hear the faint sobbing of the water, you will give a thought to her who preferred to die rather than live without you. You will know that my soul was not all false, because it held in it so true a love for you. Through the sigh of the summer wind, through the wash of the waves on the shore, my voice will come to you, and you will remember that, though I sinned greatly my repentance was terrible. Beloved, farewell!"

I laid down the pitiful letter blotted with tears, and for a minute we looked at each other in silent horror. Then Lord Saxon, rousing himself from the stupor that had come over him, cried out—

"For Heaven's sake come quickly to the river, Felicia!"

But the river was far away, and the hour long past for human power to save her from the doom that she had sought. We drove rapidly from Dunroon to Jesmond Dene, accompanied by Major Esmond, and Lord Saxon led the way to the reach.

It was all too true. There, at the spot indicated in her letter, she lay, her face upraised to the morning sky and a smile on her lips, as though she had found the water kinder than her lover's closed arms, and death sweeter than life.

Her body was speedily recovered from its cruel resting-place, and conveyed to the Hall.

Lady Saxon and her son, Major Esmond and myself held a council that same afternoon, and we decided that the last act of kindness we could show to her memory would be to keep her story of duplicity and the cause of her death secret from the world.

There was terrible dismay and consternation throughout the district when it became known that the beautiful Lady Jesmond had been found drowned. Of course it was an acci-

dent. Many people thought that she had been trying to reach the water-lilies, and so had fallen in. In the first wild moments of her great anguish we were afraid that Mrs. Fairfax would reveal the secret which we all hoped would be buried with the remains of the unfortunate girl. Fortunately she did not disclose the truth. We were compelled to tell Mr. Benson everything; and, to my astonishment, he did not seem greatly surprised. He suggested that Mrs. Fairfax should continue to have charge of the child until he was a few years older, and that afterward she should be provided for on the estate.

Lady Jesmond's funeral will not soon be forgotten. It was attended by rich and poor, and there was no one who did not regret and grieve over the fair young life so abruptly and, as it seemed, so cruelly cut short.

Lord Saxon was there as chief mourner. The vast assemblage of spectators, beholding his white set face, little dreamed of the tragedy in which he had shared.

"May heaven pardon me if I was too hard upon her!" he said to me, as we stood together after the funeral.

By the end of July a calm that was almost painful had settled over Jesmond Dene. The grass had grown on Alice's newly-made grave, and people wondered why it was always surrounded by beautiful flowers, yet never had a headstone.

There was a calm too at Dunroon; for its master had gone away, and his mother believed that he would never return.

He had suffered terribly during the recent trying days—so much so that he was a changed man. He regretted having spoken so bitterly to the erring woman, and that he had not been more patient. He felt that he ought to have known what she meant when she said so strangely, "To-morrow!" and he blamed himself for not at the time realizing all that her words portended and taking steps to frustrate her design. He did not forget her; and for years his life was imbittered and darkened by the tragedy in which he had played so conspicuous a part.

Meanwhile little Guy grew and prospered. At Mr. Benson's solicitation I remained at Jesmond Hall to superintend the house and take charge of the child. My aunt Annette died without ever knowing the whole truth; and I took every

care of the unfortunate woman on whose shoulders the responsibility for this sad tragedy rested.

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Six years afterward, when every one had ceased to expect him, Lord Saxon came home. It was in June, and the nightingales had begun to sing. He asked me to walk with him to hear them; and where he had lingered when he first kissed me and lovingly whispered my name we now stood again. He told me how he was learning to love me when that fair but frail woman came between us and snatched his very soul away. He asked me to trust him with my love and to be his wife; while the nightingales sung as though they had always known how my story must end. I did not say "Yes," at once. It was not the passionate love of "long ago," but the more enduring love of maturer years, that I gave him. We were married; and I am now Lady Saxon of Dunroon, and the Dowager Lady Saxon was overjoyed at the realization of her long-deferred hopes. Sooth to say, I worshiped my husband, and we are very happy; but the words of that terrible letter haunt him. Nello is strong and brave; but there are times when I can see that he is nervous, and those times are when the wind sighs amongst the trees and we can hear the soft low sobbing of the waves on the shore.

But for all that we are happy; and I know now what the nightingale sings about in June.

THE END.

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